

HOW TO BE A GOOD FARMER— EVEN IN A CITY

CREATING A COMMUNITY-BASED MINISTRY

I love playing in dirt. If I had another life to live, I would probably be quite content to be a farmer. But I can do farming in this life too. And so can you and your church—even if your church is in a big city.

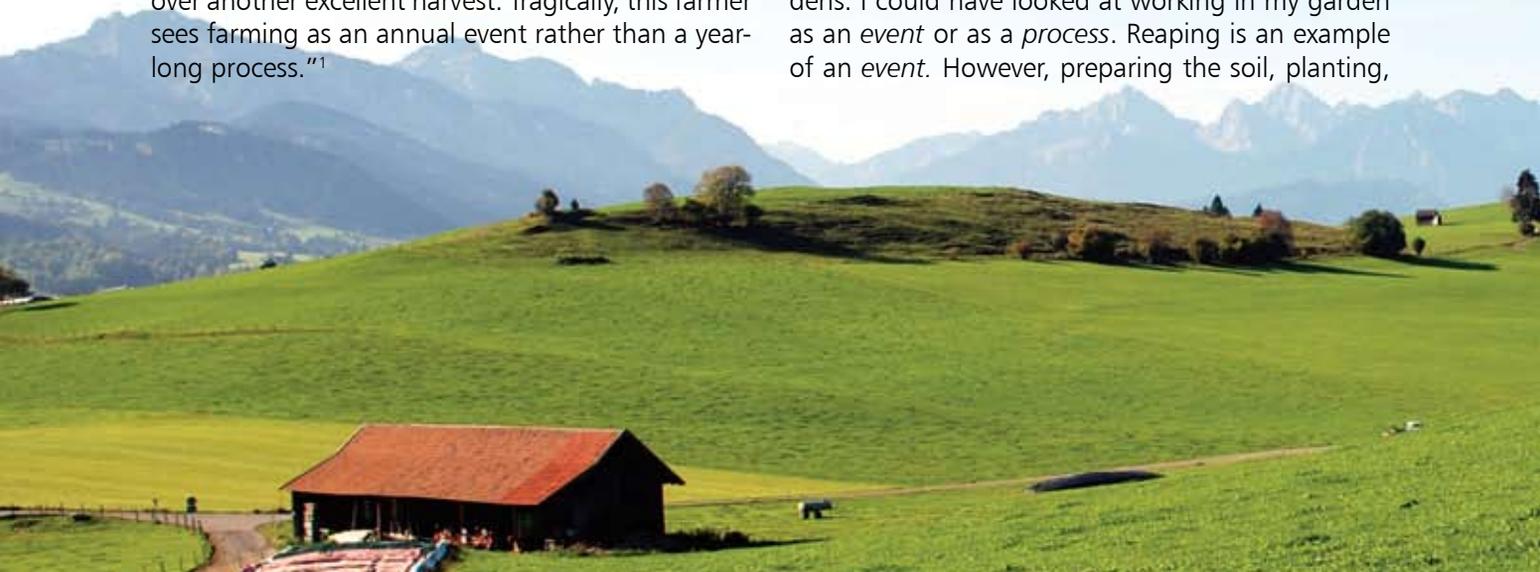
“Imagine a farmer who owns five hundred acres of fertile land and employs one hundred farm hands. His large, well-kept barn contains various pieces of seldom-used farming equipment. Corn is their preferred crop, but farm workers rarely plow, weed, or plant. They hardly ever water or fertilize. In fact, very little farming at all is done during the year—until fall. It is then that the gleaming reaper is cranked up and put into service. High up in the cab the farmer steers toward the intended field while the farm hands applaud vigorously. The farmer motors back and forth over the cropless ground. A few wind-born seeds from other farms that landed on his acreage months ago have sprouted into an occasional stalk. The large reaper scoops these up and deposits them in the bin. Back at the barn the farmer pulls eight ears of corn out of the reaper and shows them to the workers. Together they rejoice over another excellent harvest. Tragically, this farmer sees farming as an annual event rather than a year-long process.”¹

When my husband and I were in pastoral ministry in New York City, USA, occasionally our church would hold evangelistic *events*, such as evangelistic campaigns, to do reaping. Now reaping is a very good thing. Since then, however, it has dawned on us that **reaping is best done when you’ve been farming!**

I don’t want you to miss the complexity of this concept. Jesus “said to his disciples, ‘the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers [not only reapers²] into his harvest field’” (Matthew 9:37, 38, NIV). The previous verses in Matthew 9 describe how Jesus’ compassionate mingling and healing ministry prepared the soil and nurtured the crops in preparation for reaping.

The cities, the villages, and the communities around our churches are our “harvest fields.” We might be tempted to think that the only farm workers Jesus needs are those who do reaping. However, there is other work in the field that must be done first, or there will likely be very little to reap.

In various places I have lived, I’ve had big gardens. I could have looked at working in my garden as an *event* or as a *process*. Reaping is an example of an *event*. However, preparing the soil, planting,



watering, fertilizing, cultivating, and reaping all put together is a *process*. I have a *Farmer's Almanac*, which outlines the farming *process* for an annual growing season. Most of the months are dedicated to what comes before reaping, and these activities are as important as reaping. A small part of the year is spent in reaping.

In *How to Grow an Adventist Church*, Russell Burrill, a veteran evangelist, concludes that evangelism is not an event—it is a process.³ Experience has taught him that few people are won to Christ by one exposure. Rather, they need several exposures to the gospel. Churches need to use various approaches for the varied minds in their community. This is a process that takes time. No shortcuts here.

Jesus was the ultimate Model of a Farmer—a Gospel Farmer. His way of exposing people to the gospel was wholistic. He had an intentional process as He mingled with people, showed sympathy, met their needs, thus winning their confidence. Then He reaped—inviting them to follow Him.⁴

What would Jesus do if He was an Elder in your church? He would likely advise that your church follow something like the above process in “His harvest field” around your church. Leaders who have studied Jesus’ incarnational ministry method have contextualized it for these end times. I have formatted some principles of incarnational ministry into

10 FARMING COMMANDMENTS

1. *Thou shalt **study** Jesus’ ministry method and **pray** for:*

- A spirit of revival, of love, and caring for the people in your community – resulting in more workers (“Pray ye therefore. . .” Matt 9:38, KJV);
- The workers as they work in the harvest field;
- **The Rain – the Holy Spirit** – throughout the growing season. *No Rain – no crop and harvest!*

2. *Thou shalt assess the resources in thy church.*

This is like checking farming equipment/supplies/workers. Have your church members fill out a form that lists their experience/interests/time availability, etc.

3. *Thou shalt establish a **Social Action Leadership Team (SALT)**.* This is like establishing the farm management team. The SALT should have around 4-6 members with the following qualifications:

- Willing and able to work in a team that will help launch the church into ministry that will be meaningful to people in the community.
- Willing and able to interview key leaders in the local community to discover the felt needs of the community on which your church will focus.

4. *Thou shalt choose thy territory. Narrow it down.* This is like choosing a “garden plot” on which to concentrate. God has not chosen us to take care of the more than 6 billion people in the whole world. We cannot “farm” every bit of existing land. If your church is in a big city, choose a neighborhood and decide how many blocks your church will focus on. If your church is in suburbia, or in a rural area, you can choose certain zip codes for your territory.

5. *Thou shalt do a demographic analysis on the chosen territory.* This is like testing/analyzing the composition of the “soil.” For your service to the community to be relevant, it’s important to know various details about the people in your territory. For example, a demographic analysis will reveal answers to: How many people live here? What is the median age? How do people make a living? What is the economic situation of the people? How much education? What religions are they affiliated with? etc. You can find demographics for a given territory through the census or official statistics provided by your national government. Once you find the web site for your country, search it for “local area” demographic numbers.⁵

6. *Thou shalt drive or walk around the chosen territory and note the types of homes, stores, churches, and people, etc.* This is like looking over your farming field. This activity can also be a prayer walk/drive, praying for who/what you see. Make notes of the characteristics of the neighborhoods, the kinds of housing—and their appearance, the age group you see on the streets, and any other impressions. If you drive instead of walk, have someone drive while a partner takes notes.
7. *Thou shalt talk to community leaders and business people to discover community needs as they see them.* This is another part of testing the “soil.” The relationships formed with community leaders because of this step in the process may result in planting seeds. The **Social Action Leadership Team** does the interviews.
8. *Thou shalt earn “Social Capital.”* Join community boards, town councils, local ministerial associations (pastors), civic clubs—such as Rotary International, Lions, Kiwanis, etc. to network with community leaders and business people. This part of the process makes investments in relationships (social capital) and also plants seeds.
9. *Thou shalt develop a church strategic plan for church community involvement based on the felt community needs thou hast discovered and the resources and dreams of thy church. (Be sure you implement your plan!)* This plan gives guidance to all parts of your church and unites them in meeting the needs of the soil in your community and in planting seeds.
10. *Thou shalt look for ways that God is already working in thy community. Celebrate, acknowledge, cooperate.* You don’t need to invent all your community outreach. In addition to establishing an on-going “embedded

ministry” (niche) in your community you can partner with and support existing community social programs. This also plants seeds, and as more and more relationships are formed with the people involved, you may be able to share Christ & His biblical truth with them.

- 11th Commandment: *Thou shalt not ignore commandments 1-10, and thou shalt remember to*
- *Reap where thou hast farmed!*⁶
 - *Keep what thou dost reap (disciple—preserve the harvest)!*

These Farming Commandments can apply to any setting—from small towns to big cities. I wish my husband and I had followed these principles of incarnational ministry when we were at our church in New York City. If your church follows these principles, you will prepare the soil of your community so that there will be more good ground and less hard ground, rocky ground, or thorny ground, as described in Matthew 13:3-8. The farming of community-based ministry helps plow hard ground (the path), removes rocks (hardness and barriers) and thorns (helping people with their cares and worries), so that there will be more good ground and more fields in your community where the “harvest is plentiful.”

Happy farming!



¹ A parable by Kim Johnson, *Spiritual Body Building Lessons*. Silver Spring, MD: GC Ministerial Association, 1997, p.117. Used by permission.

² Inserted by author.

³ Russell Burrill, *How to Grow an Adventist Church*, Fallbrook, CA: HART Books, 2009, p. 32.

⁴ See *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143. Matthew 9 is a biblical rendition of *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.

⁵ For more information on community assessment see *Understanding Your Community*, by Monte Sahlín. Available from www.AdventSource.org.

⁶ And, if it seems difficult to reap in your particular field, keep serving your community in Jesus’ name—anyway! Why? Because that’s what Jesus would do!

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