



YOUTH SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT IDEAS RELATED TO FOOD, AGRICULTURE, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

BFFP Website: www.jhsph.edu/clf/bffp

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1) Build a composting bin/system and collect food scraps from the faith community or other events (and allow people to bring their compost from home if the system is large enough). This would involve researching why composting is beneficial (e.g., how much landfill space is saved by diverting food scraps to a compost bin, etc.), what things can and cannot be composted, what is the best composting system for you, how to construct the system, how to manage it once constructed, and how to use the finished compost (if you create a vegetable garden, this would be a perfect, inexpensive, complete, and organic fertilizer).

2) Build some rain barrels and collect rain water from the roofs of your church/school/home for use in watering ornamental plantings, vegetables, etc. while learning about water as a precious resource and the importance of water in your faith tradition. There are several workshops which can instruct teens in how to build a rain barrel (some are free; others cost about \$50: [Parks and People Foundation](#) and [Blue Water Baltimore](#) offer workshops, and [Baltimore Green Week](#) usually has workshops, too. Once the student learns how to build one, it might be fun for them to go to a home improvement store and search out the materials. This may require them to be creative in substituting parts, as not everything available at the workshop will necessarily be available at the store.

3) Help to design, plant, and maintain a vegetable garden. Tie biblical agricultural laws (such as leaving the corners of the fields and fallen harvests to the poor or grouping certain plants together in a field) to the garden. Host a dinner using produce from the garden.

An additional project might be to figure out how to translate ancient biblical gleanings laws into modern practice at the church; for instance, donating the produce from the corners of the fields to a soup kitchen, food pantry, or others in need.

4) Organize a fundraiser that serves healthy, sustainably-produced foods in order to raise money that can buy good food for those in need. The student can work to identify the recipient, decide how to host the fundraiser, and which food to purchase or donate based on what they've learned (for instance, they may discover that many poor people do not have access to healthy fruits and vegetables even though they have a greater chance of experiencing diet-related diseases like diabetes and heart disease).

5) Help to design, plant, and maintain a butterfly and bee garden. Many of our pollinators are declining in number (50% of honeybees have disappeared since the 1950s, but they are responsible for pollinating 15% to 30% of our food crops). Students can learn why pollinators are important and come to understand the significance of biodiversity by studying God's creation of a vastly diverse array of plants and animals, and God's instruction to Noah to preserve all creatures of the world, etc.

6) Research biblical agricultural laws and holidays and relate them to how we produce and eat food today by examining one aspect of the food system (e.g., organic v. conventional (non-organic) foods; kosher laws, particularly the current debate about what "kosher" entails or should entail; local foods v.

those which come from far away; processed foods v. whole foods, are there vegetarian options available for those who don't eat meat, etc.) Have them examine whether the foods Americans tend to eat are consistent with a particular biblical law. For instance, they could assess one or more meals eaten at home/church/synagogue/school, etc. by asking:

- a. Are the foods healthful, both in terms of personal nutrition, the well-being of the planet, and the well-being of those who grew and harvested the food? For example, they could learn about how to read nutrition labels, calculate the amount of greenhouse gases that went into bringing a strawberry from California to their table and how those gases impact climate change, food production, etc.,¹ complete a simple life cycle analysis of a particular food (e.g., what materials were required to grow, process, package, transport the food, and what are some things, like greenhouse gases, pollution, and advertising that result from each of these processes?), learn about the consequences of pesticides on their own health and that of others, or research how energy-intensive livestock raising is and how high meat consumption relates to nutrition and climate change.
- b. What are some alternatives to eating processed foods? Where can people find healthful foods, both nutritionally healthful and healthy for the earth? Have them research a list of farmers' markets, CSAs, farmer stands, and farms, format it nicely, and distribute it to the congregation.
- c. The student might conduct a cooking demonstration using foods that were purchased at a local farmers' market and that are in season and sustainably-produced. While doing this, they can share with the congregation the benefits to eating this kind of food. Also, they might devise a list of recommendations for how to cook healthfully and/or together with one's family and friends in time-efficient ways. Many people would like to cook, but have trouble finding the time to do this, so providing folks with ideas for how to turn cooking into a fun activity, family time, or something that doesn't take several hours could be very useful.

7) Work with a local soup kitchen/food pantry to review what kinds of foods are provided in terms of health and nutrition and then make recommendations for how to improve what it offered (if it's found that the products are, for instance, often high in sodium or sugar).

8) Interview a farmer who grows a fair-trade product. (Baltimore Food & Faith can probably help you to connect with one by phone or e-mail, if needed.) How has the farmer's life changed by participating in a system that provides adequate livelihoods to them and their families? Have the youth contrast the lives of farmers who are not fairly paid for their products with those who are and make recommendations regarding how to locate and purchase fairly-traded products.

9) Interview a local farmer who grows food sustainably. (We can give you their contact information if you'd like.) What are their experiences running a farm? Is it economically viable? What are the biggest challenges? Why do they choose to avoid using pesticides, herbicides, and synthetic fertilizers? What do they love about their work? What is challenging about their job?

10) When it is time to celebrate a student's Bar or Bat Mitzvah, First Communion, Reconciliation, or Confirmation, have them help to plan which foods and beverages will be served to reflect what they learned during their service project. For instance, they could serve foods that they helped grow, that they learned had a smaller impact on the environment, or that are healthier than what they might

¹ There are several ways of making such calculations, and the Food and Faith Project can help to identify these. One website to explore is: <http://www.eatlowcarbon.org/>.

usually choose. If they help to create a butterfly garden, the flower arrangements could incorporate blooms that they helped nurture.

They could go even further than this, too, and make as much of the party as possible truly “sustainable.” Some ideas for doing this are:

- i. Serve organic and/or fair-trade chocolate, coffee, tea, and other treats. Choose meat, dairy, and eggs from animals that were pasture-raised, cage-free, or free-range to ensure the animals were raised humanely (<http://www.eatwellguide.com>; <http://www.localharvest.org>). Most stores now sell at least some organic food. Conventional grocery stores, Trader Joes, Whole Foods, and local food cooperatives have many options that are both organic and fair-trade, and you can find other options on-line just by Googling.
- ii. Instead of using plastic utensils and Styrofoam plates, try re-usable dishware to reduce the amount of trash being sent to the landfill (or at least compostable plates and utensils and take to a nearby industrial composting facility).
- iii. [Serve tap water](#) instead of bottled water. Tap water is less expensive, just as safe, and uses less oil (17.6 million barrels of oil are used each year to produce plastic water bottles, and only 14% of the bottles made are recycled, the rest ending up in our landfills).
- iv. Print your invitations on recycled paper, or better yet, save the paper altogether and send the invites via e-mail. [E-vite](#) has a lot of great templates for creating invites and allows you to manage your RSVPs, etc.
- v. Use potted plants for centerpieces that can go home with your guests who can then use them as houseplants or in the garden rather than buying flowers or other centerpieces which will just end up in the trash. If you want to use flowers, seek out those which are locally grown and/or grown without chemicals. Many farmers’ markets have farmers who also grow flowers during spring, summer, and fall, often without pesticides ([Maryland farmers’ markets](#)). Some florists are also working to provide [locally grown arrangements](#). Decorating with fresh fruit that can later be eaten is also a good choice, and other ideas include creating centerpieces with canned food or food baskets that can be donated to a soup kitchen, or [stuffed animals that can be given to a children’s hospital](#).
- vi. Compost any of the veggie and fruit scraps that are leftover from the party to help reduce pressure on our landfills. Food residuals and grounds waste unnecessarily make up about a quarter of the U.S. municipal solid waste stream ([Find a Compost Facility](#) and [Composting for Congregations](#)).
- vii. Set up recycling containers for anything that can’t be composted or reused, such as plastic containers, aluminum cans, cardboard, wrapping paper, etc. ([Baltimore County recycling program](#) and [Baltimore City recycling program](#).)
- viii. Distribute any food that you don’t use (and/or won’t use later) to a local soup kitchen or food pantry.
- ix. Many other resources exist online with ideas for how to host an environmentally sustainable party.

11) Volunteer to help glean from farmers’ fields, with the produce harvested being donated to the hungry. The [Mid-Atlantic Gleaning Network](#) provides opportunities for groups to glean together as does [First Fruits Farm](#) and [Garden Harvest](#).