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'ELITE' CHURCH PUTS THE NEEDS OF THE HUNGRY UP FRONT —BY PLANTING A GARDEN

[Note: All personal names, geographic locations, and names of churches or other organizations in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of study participants.]

Westminster Presbyterian Church holds a place of prestige in a Midwest urban center. It stands on grounds that take up almost an entire block in one of the city's more affluent neighborhoods. For decades, the elegant Gothic structure served as a gathering place for wealthy and successful urbanites.

The Rev. Amy Chen, fresh from seminary and a Transition into Ministry program, knew this would be very different from the congregation in which she was raised, a small Asian-American Presbyterian church with a praise band.

When interviewing for the position of associate pastor at Westminster, she noted the pride members took in their "high church" worship services and the choir and organ music. While these features made the church a destination for classical music fans, the membership's reputation as elitist, emotionally cold, and overly educated deterred a range of potential newcomers.

"We're recovering from an image of being a very elite social club," she said.

One thing that's helped has been the church's vegetable garden. Westminster's senior pastor and its mission outreach committee returned from a retreat enthusiastic about the idea of planting a large garden in front of the church. Chen helped work out the details of an arrangement through which all fresh produce grown would be given to a local non-profit that distributes food to immigrants, refugees, and other low-income people.



Although she calls herself conflict-avoidant, she played a key role in working with the city council to resolve permitting issues over the placement of the garden and the fence around it. Members of the city's powerful historic preservation commission objected to the change, saying it was historically inappropriate for the street lined with Victorian houses and churches, and asked that the garden be relocated to the back of the church property.

But Chen said the visibility of the vegetable garden has been part of its impact, on the neighborhood and on the congregation itself.

"The garden is out on [the main street], as opposed to in the back, purposefully—to bear witness to what we are called to do, and to bear witness to the fact that even though no one is hungry on [this street], there are people who are hungry in the city.

"I think the controversy that it created in the neighborhood has really kind of jazzed up people in the congregation in a way, feeling like 'Yeah, this is our mission! Yeah, that's what the church is about! We're here to bear witness to the things that are unjust in this world, share that with the world and bring notice to it—and then do something about it.' I think that really has been a cool thing for them."

This was a significant change for Westminster, Chen felt. Traditionally its members have been generous with donations but reluctant to get personally involved in the lives and problems of people outside their comfort zone.

"We're really good at trying to transform the world from far away.... There are a lot of people who do invest their time, but it's more of the 'Here's what I will provide for you' kind of ministry. 'Here's the food that I am providing you, and I will stand behind this line, and you will go eat there, and I will have dinner at home.' [There's] less space to engage with people."

She encourages this shift in what ministry means at Westminster because she believes it reflects more closely the message of the Gospel: "I just feel like Jesus' ministry was so hands-on. It was the touching of the leper; it was the eating with the outcasts. It was just so *lived*—it was so messy. We don't like getting messy here. We like keeping our hands clean."

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Chen has used the garden as a bridge to engage the congregation with the community in other ways. For instance, she helped create a mission weekend for middle school students around the theme of local food issues, with participants volunteering at the non-profit that distributes the garden's produce.

Still, she said she'd like to see an even deeper level of engagement.

"I think it hasn't fully lived into what I can see it being. The idea was that people who were receiving food—a lot of them who were farmers and planters—would come help us garden and teach us to garden. So that there would be sort of that [sense of] 'Yes, we have a garden, we're providing some food, but you're teaching us how to garden....' And that hasn't happened quite as much."

Chen feels encouraged by a new partnership the church recently formed with some Presbyterian churches in South America.

"I think sometimes we learn to do things a certain way abroad, and then we can learn to bring it back to the States. What we're doing in [South America] in terms of mission is much more of a partnership model, not 'Hey, the American church knows what you need— here's what we're going to provide.' But it's much more listening and then letting them, on their terms, decide what we might be able to do alongside them."

Meanwhile, the garden has produced approximately 1,000 pounds of fresh vegetables several years in a row, and membership at Westminster is strong and growing.

"I think some people think it's, like, a museum almost when they go past it, [but] we have a garden now that actually makes it look like we have people coming inside and taking care of that. And I think that does send a visual message to people—it's not just a stone building."

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