



Introduction to Bethlehem Farm

FOUNDED

December 8, 2004

LOCATION

Summers County, West Virginia, is located in central Appalachia. The Farm is located in the community of Clayton in the southeastern part of the state, above Pence Springs and between Hinton and Alderson (2.5 hours southeast of Charleston). A road naming program in our county in 2014 gave us the fun address of “572 Bethlehem Farm Lane.”

FARM COMMUNITY

The Caretakers live in intentional Christian community, basing their lives on the Gospels and living out the four cornerstones of service, simplicity, prayer and community.

VOLUNTEERS

Each year, over 400 volunteers join the Caretakers to live together as a community. During their week at the Farm, volunteers serve the surrounding community, pray together, learn about and from the people of Appalachia, and experience ways of practicing and living a sustainable life.

Mission and More

Bethlehem Farm is a Catholic community in Appalachia that transforms lives through service with the local community and the teaching of sustainable practices. We invite volunteers to join us in living the Gospel cornerstones of prayer, simplicity, service, and community.

While Bethlehem Farm serves our sisters and brothers primarily through low-income home repair and work with local community organizations, our work involves much more than just the physical labor. We go beyond hammering nails and painting walls and dig deep into the basic need for people to feel loved and appreciated. With a focus on social justice and the cornerstones of community, simplicity, prayer and service, we emphasize working with people rather than for them, and we strive to always learn from one another.

Bethlehem Farm's mission does not involve imposing other values and standards of living on those we serve. Although volunteers might find the ways of those we work with different, it does not mean that one is necessarily better than another. We focus on building relationships and finding common ground, rather than on the differences that might divide us. Volunteers often leave here feeling they are taking home more than they have given, because the people of Summers County and surrounding areas are rich in spirit, family, pride, and faith—gifts that are freely given to stranger and friend alike.

The Weekly Schedule

Groups are generally asked to arrive between 6:30pm and 7:00pm in the evening (after having your evening meal). The first evening includes a tour of the grounds, orientation, and evening prayer. The next day is usually spent on the Farm with a “Tool & Safety” presentation, farm chores between breakfast and lunch, an introduction to the history and mission of Bethlehem Farm, a hike around the property with a conversation about Catholic Social Teachings, some free time, dinner, dishes, and Eucharist.

All of the volunteers, leaders included, are divided into different work crews for the remainder of the week. The crews visit a different work site each day. Most crews will also spend a day at the Farm on Home Crew doing meal preparation, housekeeping, and other aspects in the ministry of hospitality. Each group is given a chance to plan group prayer with the help of a Caretaker. Some crews may also spend a day on Farm Crew, working in the garden or around the farm. On the morning of departure, we have our closing prayer together, pack our vans, eat breakfast, clean the house and depart around 10am.

A WORK DAY AT BETHLEHEM FARM

We rise early and begin each day by centering our hearts and thoughts on the day at hand through prayer. After prayer, we do chores around the Farm grounds for about 30-45 minutes to work up an appetite for a good breakfast prepared by the Caretakers and volunteers. The rest of the day is spent on the work sites. Volunteers may find themselves doing anything from visits to the Hospitality House, to working alongside a family in repairing their home (no prior experience necessary! The Caretakers teach you everything you need to know). Lunches are packed in the morning and eaten at the site. At the work site, we also encourage volunteers to visit with the West Virginians with whom we're working. We strongly believe that this relationship is essential in keeping with our mission to know and love the people of our community. Work crews return to the Farm for dinner, dishes, and evening prayer. Some evenings have special programming (community night, River of Life church service, electricity fast), while other evenings are passed in conversation and recreation. At 11pm, the lights go out, so everyone can rest up for a new day.

A Different Way of Living

A week at Bethlehem Farm is an opportunity to experience another way of living. Our decisions and actions are based on the Gospel cornerstones of prayer, community, simplicity and service, which lead us to depart from "life as usual" in several ways. As part of simplicity, we give up TVs, radios, cell phones, i-pods, and email to focus more on our relationships with God, each other, and ourselves. We dress modestly and give up makeup and hair dryers for the week to remind ourselves that we are beautiful the way we are, since we are made in the image and likeness of God. We also give up wearing watches for the week, so we can be in the moment and live on "God's time".

Our commitment to teach sustainability and care for God's good creation also impacts how we live. We conserve water: we limit ourselves to two showers for the week (one indoor and one outdoor bucket shower), we limit our toilet flushing (if it's yellow let it mellow, if it's brown flush it down), and we turn the water off while brushing our teeth. We conserve electricity by turning off the lights when we leave a room. In order to conserve other resources and provide fresh and healthy food, we eat as locally and organically as practical, which means the food may be a little different than some folks are used to, since it is prepared from scratch and uses locally raised meat. We also recycle anything we can and compost our food scraps, so that nothing God has given us is wasted.

Volunteers coming for a week at Bethlehem Farm should look at the week as a time to learn and grow, to be challenged by new ideas, to be open to new ways of living, and to share their own experiences of the Gospel cornerstones of prayer, community, simplicity, and service.

The Overview

At Bethlehem Farm, we are more than a "work camp" for volunteers. We invite volunteers to be a part of our mission and our home. We build community with each other by working, praying, laughing, and loving together. We live simply to appreciate the gifts that God has given us. We pray together to grow closer to God and to one another. We serve with local people, we serve each other, and we also open ourselves to be served by others. By living out the Gospel cornerstones each day of our lives, we offer volunteers not just the opportunity for service, but the opportunity to experience another way of life.