



Bethlehem Farm

Caretaker Interview Resources



Updated February 2023



BETHLEHEM FARM MISSION STATEMENT

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, community, simplicity** and **service**.

VISION of the FUTURE

We envision the purpose of Bethlehem Farm to:

- + be a **center of reflection and prayer in the service of action**, inspired by the **Eucharist** and open to the **Spirit**.
- + **work *with* people and empower people** to address local needs, especially low-income home repair, but remaining open to God's call for us to other ministries.
- + **form a "contrast community"**¹ that chooses to build with God's plans in mind, rather than blindly following a culture that promotes pleasure, wealth, and power.
- + **pray** in both traditional and creative ways in order to foster spiritual growth, keep the focus on Christ, and mutually encourage one another
- + **encourage *metanoia*** in ourselves, our volunteers, and the community we serve, with emphasis on the Eucharist as a sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God
- + **form an intentional Christian community** of trust, commitment, faithfulness, and challenge in the spirit of the Apostles
- + **be an authentic local community** that seeks to 'be the change we wish to see in the world'² and which, therefore, supports sustainable practices³
- + **embody genuine Catholic** beliefs to counter existing misconceptions regarding the Catholic Church and its people, letting our actions witness to our faith
- + **strive to be one Body in Christ** by pursuing ecumenical ventures and always giving a favorable interpretation to others' views as a sign of mutual respect⁴

¹ Models of the Church, Avery Dulles, S.J., in The Church Emerging from Vatican II, Dennis Doyle. p.32

² quote generally credited to Mohandes Gandhi

³ At Home in the Web of Life, 1995. a pastoral message on sustainable communities in Appalachia from the Catholic bishops of Appalachia. pp. 2,3,25,41-54

⁴ The Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius Loyola, 22



Putting the Bethlehem Farm Vision into Practice

by Eric Fitts

“What is the vision for Bethlehem Farm?” The question came again, this time in a conference call with an applicant considering joining our community. A smile creeps across my face: it’s dream time, a time to think with God’s plan in mind and to embrace the future with open arms!

I see our vision as a trinity, composed of three parts that complement one another. We strive to serve our local community, to transform our lives and the lives of the volunteers who join us for service weeks, and to engage in sustainable practices as stewards of God’s Creation.

We strive to be an authentic local Catholic Christian community. Our service within the local community naturally flows from our Gospel call to love one another. Fully one-quarter of the residents of Summers County live below the poverty line. We are always seeking ways that our gifts can best serve the local community, whether through low-income home repair, community gardening, working with other local nonprofits, etc. At the same time, we seek to learn from our neighbors the wisdom of working cooperatively with the land and the gift of hospitality, since we, too, are impoverished in one way or another.

We encourage “metanoia,” a radical change of heart and mind, in ourselves and in the volunteers that come through our doors on service retreat weeks. Following Christ is difficult in our self-centered culture. The Church has a vision for our common destiny, in which we care for the least among us, treat all life with utmost dignity, and exercise stewardship of Creation. It is a radical calling, a calling that requires us to die to our former ways of being and rise to something new and beautiful. Volunteers leave here with a new set of eyes and some bread for the journey.

We strive to infuse the teaching of sustainability concepts throughout our work while inviting our volunteers and wider local community to practice sustainability. We currently compost, garden organically, clean our house without the use of harsh chemicals, conserve electricity (most recently by transitioning to LED lighting), use rainwater to flush our toilets, produce most of our electricity and some of our hot water from the sun using solar panels, have chickens for eggs and keep bees for honey production and we hope to continue to grow in sustainable practices over time. By exploring alternative visions of a sustainable future, we seek to apply the Gospel to our present situation.



Responsibilities and Expectations of Caretakers

Unity: All members of the community are called to be one mind and one heart, to be of one accord and to support the actions, rules, and decisions of the community, to be one in love, support and respect of one another in the community. All conflicts are to be resolved in this spirit of unity.

Sharing: Because of this unity and accord, all members are called to share their gifts and talents with the community and to share their ideas, dreams, and visions, to contribute to the discussion and planning and to help the community reach the decisions concerning all aspects of the community life.

Fidelity to the Church: Community membership is open to Christians of deep personal faith who are open to the Catholic tradition. We are a community called to acknowledge and express our faith and commit themselves, thereby, to membership and mission for the sake of God's Kingdom in history. This mission includes the proclamation of the Kingdom by our words and lives and a living witness to that Kingdom to all the community members, to the volunteers and to the low-income people of the area.

Prayer: All members of the Community are called to share in all exercises of community prayer, usually including periodic days of reflection and other prayer experiences. Prayer is essential to the growth of the community; therefore, it will always be a central part of the spirit of the farm. Community members must have a desire to grow with the community.

Simplicity: All members of the community are expected to strive for a life of simplicity according to the call of the Gospel. This involves a lifestyle of sharing and requires a spirit of detachment from possessions, clothing, money, food, alcohol, and other related things. The day-to-day living out of this call will be done on both an individual and a community basis which will be decided by the community itself.

Work: All members of the Community are expected to share in the work of the community and to be responsible for the work assigned them by the community according to their talents and abilities.

Chastity: Bethlehem Farm affirms that sexuality is God's good gift to humankind. We understand that single Caretakers come to the farm and may fall in love. We encourage those community members to prayerfully discern how each relationship can support their vocation and bring them closer to God. We support a lifestyle of chastity for single volunteers and monogamy for married couples. Bethlehem Farm Caretakers are expected to refrain from any exclusive or intimate interactions with volunteers during group weeks. These expectations are consistent whether couples are of the opposite sex or the same sex.

Accountability: All members of the community are called to be accountable to each other, both individually and collectively. We must be mindful of the responsibilities placed upon us by the community and to be accountable for those responsibilities. Community members are to openly and honestly challenge and be challenged by each other in a way that offers the opportunity for growth as persons, Christians and community members.



Caretakers Can Expect:

Mutual support and affirmation from all the members of the community.

A share in the decision making of the community according to the experience, wisdom, talents, knowledge and type of commitment of the member.

To be evaluated openly and honestly in a community of compassion, trust, and growth.

Reasonable use of the material goods of the community, including such things as automobiles, food, and other things as the needs arise.

To be invited and to openly invite others to live the Eucharist to follow the example of Christ by sharing in this meal together.

The intangibles are more difficult to express precisely, yet in some ways are more important for the formulation and growth of the community than any of the more tangible items listed above.

Joy and Peace in Community together with the other gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Thanksgiving - We are thankful for God's call to live and serve in the community and for those with whom we are called to serve - community members, volunteers and the people of the area - and thankful for the many aspects of community and most of all for the presence of God in our lives in community.

Gift/Sacrifice - We are a gift to each other and are called to die to self and be willing to give of ourselves to each other. We do this by striving to love unconditionally.

Enrichment - As nourishment for one another we must read and pray so that we might be enriched in order to enrich others in our community.

Healing Presence - All of us are wounded and in need of healing. All members of the community are called to be "Wounded Healers" who minister with compassion, openness and honesty.

As a community, we are called to expect God to work powerful miracles in us and through us as we allow ourselves to be changed.



CARETAKER COMPENSATION

Stipends should:

- *Reflect commitment to org (go up over length of commitment)*
- *Encourage simplicity of lifestyle, using first 12 months as a formation period to learn how to live a sparing-sharing Gospel lifestyle on a modest stipend*
- *Allow some payment of student loans*
- *Allow ability to save for retirement for long-term members*
- *Allow for savings (for transition or for a vehicle upon leaving, for grad school, for children's education, for down payment on first home)*
- *Allow for some travel (weddings, funerals, holiday)*
- *Reflect individual needs (living wage), being consistent and fair within reason*
- *Allow for some individual almsgiving*
- *Avoid forcing people to move on for reasons of financial hardship*

Caretaker stipend structure (net amounts after payroll taxes are paid):

First 12 months:	\$150/mo	
After completion of 12 months:	\$225/mo	(\$270/mo including retirement match)
After completion of 18 months:	\$300/mo	(\$360/mo including retirement match)
After completion of 24 months:	\$375/mo	(\$450/mo including retirement match)
After completion of 36 months:	\$450/mo	(\$540/mo including retirement match)
After completion of 60 months:	\$600/mo	(\$720/mo including retirement match)

There is an additional \$100 per month dependent stipend for each child of a Caretaker couple.

Retirement Contribution Match: up to 20% of stipend beginning at 12 mos (may be used for loan repayment)

Travel Stipend: \$500/fiscal year EST and CST, \$750/FY MST, \$1,000/FY PST

Education Awards: ~\$6,000 AmeriCorps Education Award available for up to 2 yrs, pending funding.

Student Loan Repayment: if no AmeriCorps positions available, then \$200/mo. Is available for student loan payments. Loan repayment is solely for educational loans that existed before the Caretaker's start date and must be applied for by the Caretaker and approved by the Director.

Training & Development Funds: \$500/fiscal year

Childcare benefit: Families have \$2,500/yr/child (up to \$5,000/yr) available for childcare and tuition expenses.

Store Credit: Each Caretaker receives \$25 in BF Store credit each December 1st. Caretakers are asked to wear BF t-shirts when greeting groups on Sunday evening of group weeks.

Health Insurance

Caretakers who are not covered by their parents' health insurance will qualify for WV Medicaid health insurance. Dental and vision insurance are provided as needed.

Bethlehem Farm will cover all out-of-pocket expenses (deductibles and co-pays) for the medical insurance, as long as the claim is allowable. Caretakers handle all out-of-pocket expenses for dental and vision.

Caretakers are expected to have medical and dental check-ups before arriving at the Farm.

Use of Bethlehem Farm Vehicles

Caretakers may use Farm vehicles for personal use, unless needed for business use, w/in a 300-mile round trip.

Room and Board (Valued at \$620/mo)

Caretakers receive their own bedroom Caretaker Residence. When Caretakers are residing at the Farm, all meals are included, within certain parameters. All utilities provided (electric, heat, landline phone/internet).



Bethlehem Farm Caretaker

Description

Definition

With the supervision of the Bethlehem Farm Director (or his/her designee) and accountable to the Caretaker Community, Caretakers serve as service retreat leaders, coordinate work sites, interact with volunteer groups during their visit to Bethlehem Farm and assume other roles and responsibilities as needed by the community.

General Duties & Responsibilities

- Participates in Caretaker meetings
- Plans prayer as assigned
- Coordinates work sites as assigned
- Maintains upkeep and repair of buildings and farm grounds
- Interacts with adult & youth volunteers, participating in all aspects of group weeks as a role model
- Maintains professional boundaries
- Performs regular self and group evaluations with the guidance of Community Facilitator
- Upholds Christian standards and values as described in "Responsibilities of Community Members" in the Bethlehem Farm Community Handbook

Work site Duties and Responsibilities

- Teaches basic construction skills to volunteers
- Supervises volunteers at work sites
- Plans daily work schedules and completion of work at work sites
- Maintains and ensures safety at work sites
- Builds and maintains positive rapport with families
- Responsible for the pickup, use, and return of all materials equipment, and supplies associated with the work sites
- Maintains lists of all materials used while on site

Qualifications

- Willingness to work under a variety of situations and weather conditions
- Ability to follow directions and work well with others
- Basic knowledge of construction tools and the safe use and proper care of them
- Open to collaborative ministry with volunteers and the people of the area
- Open to living a close committed community life
- A person of faith open to the Catholic tradition
- Some experience in youth/young adult ministry
- A working knowledge and belief in Catholic social teachings
- Open to prayer, simplicity, and living in community
- Desire a minimum of a one year commitment



Overview of Caretaker Roles

Animal Care: responsible for regular care and feeding of all Farm animals

Auto Mechanic/Maintenance: responsible for the general maintenance and purchasing of vehicles

Catechetical Coordinator: responsible for pre-trip, group week, and post-trip prayers and resources for groups to more fully integrate the Gospel cornerstones into the lifestyle of participants

Community Facilitator: responsible for conflict resolution, conducting Caretaker check-ins

Community Outreach: responsible for the coordination of community night events, community development, and public relations

Development Officer (Grants Team, Benefit Auction Committee): coordinates fundraising efforts, donor relations, grant writing, grants management, and the annual benefit auction fundraiser

Director: responsible for all administrative aspects of BF and its programs including supervision of Caretakers and volunteers; serves as the Board's liaison to the Caretaker community in the implementation of the mission of the Farm and is accountable to the Board for the decisions and actions of the Caretaker community.

Farm Gardener: responsible for the planning and maintenance of the Farm Garden

Facilities Manager: responsible for the upkeep and repair of Farm buildings and grounds

Hiring Coordinator: responsible for the coordination of possible Caretaker and Summer Servant applicants

Home Repair Site Leader: leads crews on home repair sites during group weeks

Home School Teacher: provides education for the children of Caretakers, if chosen over local schools

House Manager: coordinates the use and upkeep of the farm house, meal preparation, and planning, and oversees daily chores of the facility. Also responsible for supervising home crews and maintaining a clean and healthy home environment.

Newsletter Editor: responsible for creating and coordinating 2-4 BF newsletters per year and facilitating other bulk mailings

Office Manager: responsible for the management of the Farm office including bookkeeping, correspondence, and administrative support

Project Coordinator: gives direction to fellow Caretakers in their role as work site coordinators, and is responsible for projects of the farm and coordination of worksite assessment, implementation and documentation

Retreats and Spirituality Coordinator: provides for the spiritual growth and direction of the Caretaker community, leads Caretakers in offering retreat opportunities for youth or adults

Social Worker: assists Bethlehem Farm clients and in utilizing local social services

Storehouse Mgr: responsible for storehouse operations and cottage industry management

Sustainability Coordinator: coordinates existing sustainability efforts, researches innovative ways to pursue sustainability, and helps educate Caretakers and volunteers about sustainability

Volunteer Coordinator: serves as a liaison between Bethlehem Farm and the volunteer groups

Web Manager: Updates and maintains Bethlehem Farm website and other media as needed



Loan Stipend Repayment Policy

Goals for new policy:

Our guiding principle is to make this lifestyle possible for Caretakers for as long as they feel called to this work and for financial considerations not to force anyone to leave (to provide a living wage), while maintaining a simplicity of lifestyle and working within our budget.

The original intent of the loan stipend was to make loan payments for Caretakers who did not have enough Bethlehem Farm income to pay student loans. In light of the growing burden that student loans have become (in interest accumulation alone), it is time to look anew at the loan repayment policy, especially in anticipation of a time when AmeriCorps Education Awards may not be available.

The existing policy includes several steps aimed at reducing the interest being charged in the monthly payment for those who cannot or do not seek forbearance or deferment. Some people choose not to defer or forbear, so they can begin making qualifying payments for the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program (PSLF, see link below). Income-based repayment (IBR) may decrease required monthly payments to a minimal amount (possibly \$0 for a beginning Caretaker's low annual income). At some loan institutions this may result in the government paying the interest on the loan for a few years and/or can allow Caretakers to make loan payments above and beyond the minimum payment, which can reduce the principal or decrease the amount of interest capitalized onto the principle.

For more information see:

Income-based Repayment:

<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/understand/plans/income-driven>

Public Service Loan Forgiveness:

<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/forgiveness-cancellation/public-service#qualifying-employment>

Note: There are special rules that allow borrowers who are AmeriCorps or Peace Corps volunteers to use their Segal Education Award or Peace Corps transition payment to make a single "lump-sum" payment that may count for up to 12 qualifying PSLF payments.

After any available AmeriCorps terms are served and awards are applied to the loan, the Caretaker will receive the full loan stipend, which they can apply to monthly payments and to reduce principal if their payment is less than the full stipend. It is important to note that Caretakers also receive increases in their regular stipend, which gives them flexibility to make personal choices, such as paying a student loan or other debt down quicker than the monthly payment, setting aside more for retirement, maintaining a vehicle, etc. At the same time, Bethlehem Farm cannot be held responsible for how much each person decided to invest in themselves for education, so there may be some needs that are greater than the Farm can handle, whether due to insufficient funding or due to concerns regarding fairness in compensation.

The result of the new policy should be:

--all Caretakers with student loans will either:

- be AmeriCorps members and receive an AmeriCorps Education Award (at least \$5,815/yr for up to two years, pending available positions)

OR

- receive a \$200/mo loan stipend until their student debt is repaid or their service ends, regardless of how low they were able to get their monthly payment, the type of student loan, the generosity/flexibility of their lender, deferment status, etc.



New loan stipend policy:

Bethlehem Farm will supplement a Caretaker's regular monthly stipend with a \$200/mo student loan stipend under the following circumstances:

- 1) *All AmeriCorps terms available to the Caretaker have been completed*
- 2) *Any available AmeriCorps Education Awards have been used to pay down the loan*
- 3) *Verification of payment on the loan is provided to the Director on a monthly basis*

Caretakers with monthly payments above \$200/mo or with a compelling reason for special accommodation may petition the Board for a higher loan stipend.

This policy shall be reviewed annually.

Note: AmeriCorps Education Awards may be available for Caretakers for up to two year-long terms, pending award of slots through High Rocks Educational Corp. or other organizations. Bethlehem Farm pays a \$6,000 cost share for each Full-Time AmeriCorps Member. This \$6,000 is more than a beginning Caretaker's stipend would normally cost Bethlehem Farm, but we participate in the program so Caretakers have access to the generous Education Award benefit. AmeriCorps Members receive a stipend from High Rocks that exceeds the stipend amounts agreed to by all Caretakers, since it includes funds for room and board, so Bethlehem Farm AmeriCorps Members agree to reserve their agreed-upon stipend from their High Rocks paycheck and then pass the remaining funds on to Bethlehem Farm as room and board.



Parental Leave and Child Care Policy

Goals for child care policy:

Our guiding principle is to support the mission of Bethlehem Farm by making this lifestyle possible for Caretakers for as long as they feel called to this work. We seek a community where:

financial considerations do not to force anyone to leave (to provide a living wage), while maintaining a simplicity of lifestyle and working within our budget;

workloads are reasonable and sustainable, taking into account personal and family obligations, such as child care, when setting expectations for work hours;

children and parents are welcome and contribute to the mission in age-appropriate ways that allow for a healthy balance between parenting responsibilities and work responsibilities;

the Caretaker Community has the flexibility to find the best balance for everyone involved, while remaining accountable to the mission, to one another, and to the board;

the vulnerable among us, such as children, are given the greatest care and attention, including opportunities for education and enrichment, as well as attention to their changing needs;

measures are taken to retain experienced Caretakers;

volunteers are given examples of service and Christian witness as a lifestyle, lived out by a diverse community of single people, married couples, and families with children;

there are clear expectations of parents and the community as a whole as they navigate the balance between Farm work and child care;

conditions of this policy may be modified with review of the Caretaker Community and Board of Directors.

Parental Leave:

Upon the birth of a child, 6 weeks of paid leave per employed parent is granted regardless of time served as a Caretaker.

Unpaid leave, with partial benefits, is available for the first year after birth for non-vested employees, with the option to request a second year of unpaid leave from the executive committee. Partial benefits include: dependent child stipend, health insurance, room and board, child care reimbursement, staff recreation, staff retreat, travel stipend, trainings offered to the staff as a whole, and Farm store credit; partial benefits do not include: professional development or retirement matching. Retirement matching is included in partial benefits (see Child Care Leave section), but does not apply in the case of unpaid leave, since there is no stipend with unpaid leave and retirement matching is based on a percentage of the base stipend.

Employees with a minimum of 24 months continuous service prior to the expected date of the child's birth are granted 16 weeks paid leave per employed parent.

The first two weeks shall be taken in full days by each parent or forfeited, but the remaining weeks may be shared between parents and/or taken in half days. Leave may begin prior to the birth, as needed by the couple. Leave time not taken before the child turns 3 years old shall be forfeited.

Parents shall advise the Caretaker Community one month in advance of their plans for taking parental leave and keep the community informed as adjustments are made to that plan.



Child Care Leave:

Employees with a minimum of 24 months continuous service with children not currently in school may:
take full child care leave (20% of stipend),
work ¼-time (40% of stipend),
work ½-time (60% of stipend) or
work ¾-time (80% of stipend).

Partial benefits are included in child care leave. The percentage of professional development benefit available will correspond to the percentage of time worked (0% for full leave, 25% for ¼-time, 50% for ½-time, and 75% for ¾-time.) Childcare leave benefits are available for one year renewable terms. Each employee parent on full or partial childcare leave can renew their leave annually, pending review by the Caretaker Community.

[Note: The dependent child stipend is intended to cover the regular costs associated with caring for children. As the number of children in a family increases, the time necessary for leave increases, so the base stipend decreases, but the dependent child stipend added with each child should lessen the impact of the decrease in base stipend and enable for the care of the children, even if the family also has to tighten up in some other areas.]

When both parents are employed, the equivalent of at least one full time position should be covered between the two parents.

Parents shall advise the Caretaker Community one month in advance of their plans for taking child care leave and keep the community informed as adjustments are made to that plan. As usual, comp time may be used or contributed to if actual hours do not meet or exceed planned work time.

If the Caretaker Community wishes to hire parents with small children who will need a part-time work situation within their first 24 months, then they may waive the vesting requirement. As it stands, the policy is meant to *retain* existing Caretakers and provide for a sustainable living situation for Caretakers staying longer term.