

## **The Beulah Land Story:** The National Farm Project of the Shrine of the Black Madonna of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church

The dream of Beulah Land began with our founder Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman (Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr.). He reasoned that true black self-determination had to begin with the ability to feed yourself. His brother, Hugh Cleage, earned a degree in agriculture from Michigan State University and his brother's experiences on his farm outside of Detroit convinced Jaramogi how impactful even a small farm could be at providing food to people in the city. He often spoke of how Father Divine built a national following by being able to feed starving Black people in Harlem during the Great Depression. He felt that a mega-farm was the most effective way to demonstrate the self-determination message that he was preaching. The Shrine's proactive self-help preaching message always emphasized positive programmatic solutions that were implemented as a religious obligation. Jaramogi said, *"Historically, Black people have vacillated between three options or approaches to the problem of improving our overall conditions: 1. Do nothing and hope the problem goes away. 2. Cry out in protest. 3. Strike out in blind rage. We cannot build an acceptable collective future unless we can get a critical mass of Black people to choose the fourth option, Build for ourselves."* He proclaimed, a farm would be a "visible symbol" that would prophesy to the world more effectively than anything we could ever say.

In 1972, a large church run farm in Georgia came on the market. Having read Jaramogi's book, and understanding his commitment to building institutions to minister to the needs of those in need, the near bankrupt farm owners contacted him to see if he would be willing to take over their farm. Jaramogi sent an emissary to speak with the group of interdenominational ministers. Jaramogi found their offer intriguing, but he concluded that the Shrine was already in the midst of a national church expansion program and an endeavor of this size, expense and social significance would divert too much from the church's existing program strategy.

By 1979, with five churches in Detroit, eight in Michigan altogether, and the establishment of regional centers in Atlanta and Houston, national expansion was an accomplished fact. Before attempting another move to the northeast or the west, Jaramogi felt it was time to begin anew the effort to acquire a large-scale farm. In 1980, The Beulah Farm Project was initiated during the church's anniversary month celebration in Detroit. Across the country, members made sacrificial annual financial pledges, filled up gleaner cards with quarters and held various fund-raisers to raise the money necessary. Public donors would remark in humorous disbelief, *"Your big farm project is going to take an awful long time if you are going to collect one quarter at a time."* Even among members there was a small contingent that regarded the enterprise as a well-intentioned folly. Annual balls and galas were held in Detroit, Atlanta and Houston. Raffles and rummage sales were held to meet quarterly drive projections. Children sponsored car washes, barbeques and raffles to do their part. The churches had summer camps in the city dedicated to educating

children on the nature and significance of farming. Several members found themselves being audited by the Internal Revenue Service. The governmental agency had difficulty believing that working class Black people would give such a significant portion of their income to a church farm project dream.

The church sent members to Michigan State University, Tuskegee University, and the University of Georgia to study agriculture, aquaculture, agronomy, cattle, and farm economics. While totally committed to its realization, most members thought of the Beulah Land Farm Project as a project that would be long time coming, and that probably, many would not live to see it. But by the early 90's, enough had been raised to begin seriously looking for a suitable site.

After considering sites in the Rio Grande Valley, central California, south Georgia, northeast Texas near Texarkana, Mississippi near Natchez among others, we realized that there were not really a lot of large tracts of suitable land available. When they were, locals were very leery about selling to Black people. We attended auctions where, once it was determined that we were serious bidders, the land was withdrawn, the sale to be rescheduled at some undisclosed future date.

Then in 1995, we began negotiating with a family that owned a large lakefront tract in northwest South Carolina near the Georgia border. The family was bitterly divided over whether they should sell. The patriarch of the family thought it unconscionable that his land would be sold to the descendants of slaves. He said, *"Niggers don't own the land, they work the land."* Adamant in his position, the family members that were eager to sell had their hands tied. However, when the old man passed, his children were not hindered by any ancestral obligation to preserve the social order of the southern past. Under the rationale that this was the "New South," they were willing to sell but coming to an acceptable price proved an epic on-again-off-again battle that took years. Finally in May of 1999, the church purchased the one thousand acre lakefront portion of the land. Then in October of the same year, the details were hammered out to purchase the remaining two thousand acre tract. Twenty years after its initiation, Beulah Land was an accomplished fact.

Beulah Land was purchased for ten million dollars in cash. New owners of the largest black-owned farm in America, we reveled in our crowning achievement. But just four months after concluding the purchase, the church's founder and architect of the Beulah Land dream, died. It was a devastating blow and a critical challenge to continue without our leader of almost fifty years. Grief and challenge notwithstanding, under our new leader, Jaramogi Menelik Kimathi, we pushed forward with our vision. We got to work immediately developing the infrastructure, on what was essentially, raw land. Millions of dollars more were necessary to provide roads, buildings, ponds, wells, electricity, an underground pipe system, fencing, livestock, farm equipment, office equipment, taxes, surveys, appraisals, vehicles, residences etc. In the summer of 2000, the national congregation met at a

convention in Detroit with the theme; "Fulfilling Our Founder's Vision." The inspirational gathering educated members and renewed our commitment.

In 2005, the land adjacent to Beulah Land was for sale. We weren't looking to buy. However, we were alerted that we were about to have some very undesirable neighbors that would alter the value of our investment in Beulah Land. We made the decision to buy an additional 1,100 acres to protect our investment. However, this move caused Beulah Land to incur two million dollars in debt. Our church has traditionally avoided long term debt. Usually we bought in cash or in short term three-year arrangements with annual payments of one-third the total. Taking on two million dollars of unplanned debt soon began to affect our ability carry out plans to develop business operations on the farm. Servicing long-term debt obligations was something that we haven't had to do since we first bought the original church in 1957.

Over the last ten years, we have struggled heroically to realize our collective dream. It took years to face the fact that Beulah Land could not be fully developed by church volunteers alone. We needed the input of professionals in various fields. We hired a cattle manager, a timber manager and a housing developer because these areas were the closest to yielding productive farm income. We also contracted a fish consultant. We entered negotiations with KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Schools' co-founder to establish a boarding school at Beulah Land. We hired an engineering firm to install commercial wells and the underground infrastructure to make possible a water bottling facility. We entered agreement with Tuskegee University's agricultural faculty to produce crops and to use their students to discover new uses for the land. One of these is the growing cotton to revive the local abandoned textile mills that could provide jobs in one of the poorest counties in South Carolina.

We also contracted an international development firm to determine the highest and best use of the land and to propose a master plan development. One of the things that became abundantly clear was that the development of Beulah Land required a massive infusion of capital that was beyond our church's ability to provide without leveraging the land and other property that the church owned around the country. The central dilemma facing the Beulah Land is finding the funding that can turn property worth millions into a development projected to be worth billions.

However great the monetary opportunity Beulah Land offers, its chief value is not economic, but psychological and spiritual. By developing the full potential of Beulah Land we can strike a devastating blow to the myth of black inferiority and the pattern of dependency that still shackles the minds of far too many. We can offer hope to young people who feel that their only hope is to beg for employment from corporations that have already proven they don't need them or risk their lives in the illegal economy. We can prove that our enterprises do not have to exist on corporate sponsorship to survive. We can produce the wealth that allows us to be a

chief benefactor to those grass-root programs and organizations that have a proven track record at being effective in changing conditions. We can provide educations for thousands of children and camps of all kinds for thousands more. We can become a visible symbol to people everywhere that we can build for ourselves and compete effectively in a competition society. Beulah Land is the tangible expression of the self-reliance, self-determination and self-realization philosophy that can eradicate the culture of victimization and low expectation that dooms many to a life of mediocrity. Jaramogi was right, *“Beulah Land can prophesy to the world more effectively than anything we could ever say.”*

The next stage of Beulah Land development requires that it become a project that goes beyond church membership. We must secure the funding to realize this dream that began with a church but now must be fulfilled by a people. Our goal is to build a productive, sustainable and positive model of self-reliance and self-determination that can inspire a generation to learn to live as a free people by seizing the opportunity afforded them in a competition society in which no one is going to help us, we have to help ourselves. We can and we will.