

## Opening Remarks: L. Ron Pringle, CEO Inter-Faith Food Shuttle

*This is an edited version of the opening remarks given by L. Ron Pringle. The video of his full remarks is [here](#).*

We built this conference as a space to convene, to talk and learn from one another. [But let me start by addressing] the elephant in the room. I know many of you are thinking about your team members back home and what they're dealing with—trying to meet this tragic need with SNAP benefits being cut [and the government shutdown].

I get calls every day asking: what does this mean for food banks? So let me paint you a picture. Imagine ... your children. If you have multiple children standing before you and you can only feed one, which one would you choose? How would you make that decision?

This is where food banks are. That is what this shutdown is forcing us to do... How do I make that choice today?

Then I thought about my grandparents. My grandmother had nine children. And they never had to make that choice. Even when tragedy struck—when my grandfather's son lost his wife at 36 and couldn't work, leaving four more mouths to feed—they still never had to choose.

I started reflecting: why didn't they have to make a choice? They knew something. They were farmers. And they were like, 'I got these four kids, I guess I can farm a little longer.' Three of those kids were girls and one little boy - and that was me, growing up on the farm, learning how to drive a tractor before I could drive a car.

It's that lived experience that brought us to today. Because if my grandparents could figure this out, there's something I can do. There's something I can learn from that, that I can build into a strategy - where I don't have to make that choice.

So here's what I would like for you to do. As we start this conference, I want you to remember this: begin with the end in mind.

Paint that picture.

Here's the end result that I see: I see a community that is thriving, taking care of themselves. They're feeding themselves, growing food for themselves. I see them watching the news, hearing about the cuts and tragedies and tough decisions that other people have to make. And they're sitting around the table saying, 'I'm going

to pray for that community - I'm going to pray for them to find a way to do what we have done.'

Because I don't have to choose which child I'm going to feed. I can take all of my children out to my backyard and we can harvest dinner together. I can take my children with me to church on Sunday morning, and after service, we can walk out to the back, to the garden, and get our Sunday dinner. We don't have to choose which child will eat. That's what I'm picturing.

That is the end result of what we want. We want a community that doesn't feel the burden of what happens in D.C. We want a community that is resilient, that they're not depending upon failed systems—because they have created their own.

So how do we do that? That same lived experience I told you about - we build it into a strategy. And community is the biggest part.

I think back to my grandparents. They weren't too big on handouts. They were wonderful when it came to hand-ups. And this is what they did: They grew their crop. Other families in the neighborhood came and helped harvest. And at the end of the day, every family took what they needed. My grandparents took the rest to market. And when my neighbor's crop came in, everyone in the community went to their house and we harvested their crops. At the end of the day, everyone got what they needed.

That's a strategy. And so in this convening, I wanted us to be able to learn and teach you how we were able to do that. We came up with a system. First, we listen. We want to hear what our neighbors have to say. The data [may tell] us that's a food desert. The data says here's the median income—this is an impoverished community.

However, when you talk to them and say, 'This data tells me you're in a food desert,' they say, 'A food what? Oh no, we've never had a grocery store around here.' But you need one—that's what the data tells us for this to be a thriving community.

And they say, 'No, we don't. We live in a food oasis. We're taking care of ourselves.' That's the information that doesn't show up in the data. So we listen.

Together we identify: what are the barriers to your community? What's preventing you from being able to do this? And then we empower. You got a solution? Let's fuel it. Okay, let's walk together. And that's the part where we act—on that decision that we've made together. And then we can step back and say, 'Wow,

that's beautiful.' Because our hands aren't on it anymore, but it's sustaining. That's the approach. That's the strategy.

So remember what your end result is - your purpose for being here. Have that picture in your head. Over the next few days, we're going to provide you the paint, all the colors for you to fill in that picture. And you have a room full of other artists who can contribute to your portrait. Don't feel you have to paint this painting by yourself.

Welcome to our first annual Growing Stronger Communities Agricultural Conference.