

## SECOND HELPINGS: GROWING STRONGER COMMUNITIES SESSION TAKEAWAYS

### The Power of Growing Together: Opening Session Panel

#### Speakers:

- L. Ron Pringle, CEO Inter-Faith Food Shuttle,
- Pastor Richard Joyner, Founder Conetoe Family Life Center
- Donald Hines, farmer
- Kelton Moore, farmer
- Reginald Cotton, famer manager and ag teacher, Halifax County Schools, Greenleaf Farm.
- Neil Westerbeek, Smithfield Foods
- Amy Beros, President and CEO, Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina,

“Begin with the end in mind,” said Ron Pringle to introduce the panel to share different aspects of the story of Conetoe Family Life Center - a rural North Carolina community feeding itself through the power of relationships and partnerships, and by understanding that people are not beneficiaries - they are providers; that farmers are not only growers, they are scientists, educators, healthcare professionals, and community builders.

Pastor Richard Joyner, who founded the Center, partnered with Food Shuttle and Smithfield Farms to build 51 raised beds either on church land or adjacent land. [Even] “with the SNAP benefits cut, with all the other cuts, this morning we’re feeding 500 families without it,” he said. “What it means to be in a food oasis, you know ... it really means that community is stronger than government.”

For Evelyn Powell, who says at Conetoe “I’m a mover and a shaker. I’m the one that will make it happen,” community is everything. “Reverend Joyner tells us every morning ... he will not [leave] a hungry person... If they say they’re hungry ... you give it to them. And that’s how we run our business. That’s how we run our farm, straight from the heart.”

And community goes both ways. “It is good to have 300 people working and not 300 people standing in line,” says Reverend Joyner. “It feels good to see our five-

year-olds learning how to use food for medicine and how to reduce chronic disease from raised beds that we started.” The Center now has 300 raised beds.

Smithfield paid for the first round of raised beds at Conetoe. “But the churches in the community have paid for 250 after that,” said Pastor Joyner. “And we’re feeding ourselves.”

For Neill Westerbeek of Smithfield Foods, the partnership with Conetoe and Food Shuttle “really comes down to making healthy food accessible, right? Connecting local agriculture, which we’re deeply a part of, with nutrition security ... Our contract partners and employees - these people are deeply tied to the sustainability of their community through the sustainability of the food they produce on their farms every day ... And so a partnership like this is natural for us.”

‘Partnership’, ‘community’ and ‘relationships’ are words that lay at the heart of this opening panel.

For Amy Beros, who in 2025 left the Feeding America National Organization to become president and CEO of Food Shuttle’s neighbor, the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, the challenges of 2025 have really taught her that “we don’t have to be everything because we are not great at everything, but there’s people like the Food Shuttle and Reverend Joyner and all the people on the stage that are uniquely qualified to do different things... [So] what’s our unique superpower? What’s theirs? And how do we combine them all to meet every need in our community?”

The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, provides Conetoe Family Life Center with TEFAP supplies (The Emergency Food Assistance Program, run by the federal government to get surplus food from American farms to Americans’ tables).

The panel discussed the importance of relationships to the bottom line of farms - especially buyers who plan with a farm before planting season to buy a certain amount of produce and then follow through, not go back on agreements. The income generated from solid agreements allows some farmers to stay on their family land. Others defray costs by sharing equipment.

Conetoe Family Life Center has also built a successful partnership with local healthcare providers. “We have set up telemedicine [clinics] in churches,” said Reverend Joyner. “You should hear what people are saying [about] the medication that they’re coming off because they have access to fresh and affordable foods.” He shared the example of one parishioner who started off complaining about changing her diet. After she took part in a community exercise to eat vegetables for 40 days, her doctors took her off 21 medications.

“She became the poster child for Conetoe,” Reverend Joyner said.

### **Farmers as scientists and educators**

Donald Hines told began farming after he retired as an FBI agent. For him, the forensic science approach he used as a detective is just as important in farming. “We talk about that squash or that zucchini or that tomato and the blood test that we take for ourselves,” he said. “I do the same thing with the plants on the farm and we send it to the lab and we get the results back and it says, all right, you need to give it more of this or less of that and if you do it right, the product comes out with good quality - and so putting more good quality produce in the mouths and bellies of families and on the tables of people in our communities .”

“It’s allowed me to feed more people...It’s not about making money. It’s never been about that for me.”

Other panelists talked about the knowledge they share with consumers buying their produce at farmers markets or roadside stands. “They can ask you questions,” said farmer Kelton Moore. “You can’t do that in a grocery store.”

Farmers on the panel also discussed how partnership and community generate innovation, including Reginald Cotton, farm manager and ag teacher for Halifax County Schools’ Greenleaf Farm. He said planting began on the school playground some 30 years ago and now the school district buys his produce for use in local schools. Food Shuttle is also a buyer.

“We are in the business of teaching students how to farm and to be self-sufficient,” he said. “And I’ll be happy to say to you, I think we’re the largest school farm on the East Coast.”

Later a group of students from North Edgecombe High School talked about the benefits of spending time at Pastor Joyner's Conetoe Family Life Center, where they help care for chickens and nurture plants from seed to harvest. "It makes me feel like I've got an opportunity that many people haven't gotten," said one teenager, while another simply offered "it makes me feel fulfilled."

"This is what sustainability looks like," said Ron Pringle to close the panel. "You have one generation that started with a vision, a seed that was planted and has grown into this tremendous tree of farmers and educators and scientists and retired FBI agents. These children are living in the shade of that, of that tree and the wind is going to blow their seeds somewhere and it's going to continue a cycle."