



INTER-FAITH FOOD SHUTTLE

Growing Stronger Communities

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE FOR NUTRITION SECURITY

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,

Pastor Richard Joyner is the founder of the Conetoe Family Life Center, a rural community centered on his church in North Carolina. He 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.”

These days hundreds of people aged five and up are learning to grow food that is nutritious and packed with health-giving benefits. The community now has 300 raised beds.

Pastor Joyner says the impact was soon felt of the first set of beds - built by Food Shuttle and financed by Smithfield Foods. “The churches in the community have paid for 250 [more beds],” he says, “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? ... 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 “there’s people like the Food Shuttle and Reverend Joyner ... 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?”

Beros’ food bank provides Conetoe Family Life Center with TEFAP supplies (the federal government’s Emergency Food Assistance Program).

The panel discussed the importance of relationships to the bottom line of farms - for example agreeing to buy a certain amount of produce before planting season and then staying true to those agreements. The income generated 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. He told 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 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.”

Farmers on the panel also discussed how partnership and community generate innovation, including Reginald Cotton, farm manager and agriculture 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.

“We are in the business of teaching students how to farm and to be self-sufficient,” he said. “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 Food Shuttle CEO 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.”

