

Grants to church food pantries promote relationships with local farmers, restaurants

by [Olivia Weeks](#) in the [March 24, 2021](#) issue



Richfield United Methodist Church in Richfield, North Carolina, was one of the early recipients of a grant that connects church food pantries in the state with local farmers and restaurants. (Photo courtesy of Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA)

A grant program for rural United Methodist Churches in North Carolina aims to help congregations see their food pantry ministries within the larger picture of hunger in America.

The project, called Come to the Table, offers mini-grants of up to \$1,000 to rural Methodist churches in North Carolina that are providing nutrition assistance to food-insecure families. It's funded through the Duke Endowment.

Michelle Osborne, program manager for faith-based partnerships at the Rural Advancement Foundation International USA, which administers the project, said the grants must be spent on purchases from local farmers, restaurants, or businesses, not from national chains.

In addition to supporting the local food economy, Come to the Table is helping faith leaders study the root causes of hunger. On January 28, RAFI and the Center for Story-based Strategy launched the first session of the School for Food Justice, Faith, and Storytelling.

"We like to say having a food pantry is great, but having a living wage in your community, so that community members don't need the food pantry, is even better," Osborne said.

Part of Come to the Table's focus grew out of changes caused by the pandemic. When most of the program's outreach was deemed unsafe in March 2020, it shifted gears. They decided their unique set of relationships put them in a position to do two things at once, said Osborne.

"We can get churches to get meals and produce to food-insecure people," said Osborne, "while simultaneously supporting farmers who need to make a living."

New partnerships between faith leaders and farmers will be the most lasting impact of the program, said Osborne. "Come to the Table is really about connections," she said. "We really want to facilitate these relationships, not just give people \$1,000 one time."

Demographic changes have led to major class and racial disparities between Central United Methodist Church in Asheboro, North Carolina, and the neighborhood surrounding it, said Randy Lee, the church's pastor of youth ministries. "The majority of our church population are White and 50 or above," said Lee. "A lot of retired folks."

The church now works closely with the local elementary school, Lee said, to help provide food to children at risk of hunger. Last summer, Central Methodist received

a Come to the Table mini-grant that helped them partner with Gabor Farms in Rockingham, North Carolina, to supply 30 families with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Distributing this produce, said Lee, was one of the easiest outreach events he's ever done. "I almost felt guilty," Lee said. "RAFI provided the funding and hooked us up with Clarence Dubois down at Gabor Farms, who provided the food."

Dubois and Lee are still in touch. "We emailed back and forth last week," said Lee. "We're hoping to do something again maybe in February."

"He's there for us," said Lee. "It's pretty amazing."

Osborne said engaging churches in hunger policy work is a long-term effort. "We're talking about narrative change and how we can use stories to change our perceptions and move toward actions," said Osborne. —Daily Yonder