

Transcript

Means of Grace

Episode 47

Luke: Welcome to Means of Grace, a podcast produced by the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. I'm Luke Edwards, associate director of church development for the Western North Carolina Conference. In today's episode, we're talking about rural food systems and how churches could make an impact on our communities in economic and environmental ways. We talked with Jamie McGirt of resourceful communities, which focuses on supporting a network of community groups, faith based organizations, small towns and resource providers in environmental stewardship, social justice and sustainable economic development across North Carolina.

And we talked with Bob Sturge pastor of Mill Grove United Methodist in Midland, North Carolina, where he and his congregation have been encouraging dimensional and evangelistic impact of predominantly rural congregations by partnering with local farmers to provide beef, we're neighboring food ministries and dinner churches. You should have seen the podcast team's faces on Zoom when I told them I wanted to do an episode about cows on the conference podcast.

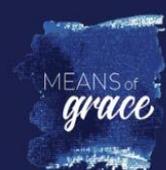
But as you'll hear, our rural Methodist churches in North Carolina are doing incredible work with their food systems and perhaps your church could too. Friends, here are Jamie McGirt and Bob Sturge. Bob, Jamie. Welcome to the podcast.

Bob: Hey, Luke. Good to be here.

Jamie: Thanks, Luke. Yes. Good to be here.

Luke: So Jamie, let's start with you. Can you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about resourceful communities and your role there?

Jamie: Sure. So my name is Jamie McGirt. I'm a faith and food coordinator with resourceful



communities. We're a program of the conservation fund, which is a national nonprofit environmental organization. We're working in 50 states since 1985 and we're redefining conservation solutions that protect nature and create jobs at the same time.

Resourceful communities being a program of the conservation fund, we specifically support grassroots organizations and churches and rural communities that across rural North Carolina are creating long lasting impacts through efforts like environmental conservation, community economic development and social equity within the faith and food initiative specifically, I support rural United Methodist pastors and lay leaders with their new or existing food ministries.

A lot of these pastors and leaders are trying to reimagine their food ministries in a way that supports their local economies and communities they serve in full ways.

Luke: Awesome. And can you just tell us a little bit about what your role there looks like and how you've been involved with the organization?

Jamie: Sure. So within the faith and food initiative and supporting pastors and lay leaders that support comes in three forms. We provide free technical assistance, and sometimes this looks like one on one coaching or a group coaching with those pastors and lay leaders, to either develop new ministries in response to challenges in their community related to food security or sometimes reshaping or adapting their existing food ministries. With small grants we're able to support rural United Methodist churches generously through the deep endowment with small grants up to \$15,000 to support these kind of food ministries that deeply engage the church and residents together and support the local food economy.

And then lastly, we provide, traditionally before COVID network convening's a way to get peers, working together, meeting one another and really exchanging the expertise and resources that they all hold. We believe the strength and capacity is really within our network across the state. It's not in each of us, the workers of resourceful communities. So we use those three approaches technical assistance, small



grants and network convening's to support grassroots leaders and church leaders across the state. Of course, right now I'm doing that all remotely from home.

Luke: Bob, can you introduce yourself and your church and tell us a little bit about my father's cows.

Bob: Love to, been a Methodist pastor for 45 years. Okay, started when I was four years old. That makes me 49. So, I was a bit of military chaplain for a number of years quite a while and more recently I actually taught school and kind of a bi-vocational scenario. And in that capacity, I took appointment with a small - I hesitate to call them a rural church. I call them a Reuben church, and for me, the term Reuben designates the fact that they're kind of culturally rural and socially rural. But they are five miles off the Charlotte Beltway, which means there's a lot of development pressure and people moving in, and so it's kind of a, the time between times. The church is Mill Grove.

It's in Cabarrus County again in the greater metro area and I know my ninth year there and in the context of being there, we just had a variety of discussions and it kind of thunder down. What could we do that unique to the kingdom and just promoting the kingdom. And the answer came fairly easily and that is raise cows. And we have some cattle farmers on the church and our lay leader in particular was very instrumental and essentially allowed us access to what for him was a second farm.

So we have a herd of cows, and I have said to many folk, I wonder how many Methodist churches in America have a herd of cows, but we have our own herd and but then we've also networked with the other farmers and we buy cows. Cows are donated to us, but just kind of locally networking with farmers and in terms of distribution it's gone through some stages initially, and we're still doing this. We basically have supplied beef to nonprofit dining situations like men shelters, drug rehab.

Wherever there's a ministry that's serving people meals on a daily basis, that's a great fit for us because we just were able to upscale their menu and it's just a good fit. More recently, and this is with you, Luke. We've been talking and engaging more



with the dinner church program where local congregations can use the beef as well. So, it's just it's been a lot of fun, and we've been blessed, and it just seems like every time we turn around that there's were gifted in some way, and we're just very excited about it.

Luke: Jamie overall hope for this podcast is that our listeners will kind of come a way understanding rural food systems better and how churches can get involved in rural food systems. Could you tell us what some of the most pressing issues you all are seeing in regards to rural food systems?

Jamie: You know, I really loved thinking deeply about this prior to joining today. I was thinking, you know, agriculture has long been considered the backbone of rural communities and rural food systems they've been suffering well before 2020 but COVID-19 really feels like it was the straw that broke the camel's back. When we're talking about rural food systems, you know, before COVID I might have said that some of the largest challenges were development, specifically black land lords, which has been rampant in black communities not just in North Carolina but across especially the South.

You know the shift from small farm systems, modern agriculture systems, which have a greater total on the environment on human labor forces, and just it seems like a repeated environmental disaster like onslaught we've experienced with recent hurricanes and Eastern North Carolina. But with 2020, you know, I feel like and I say it was the straw that broke the camel's back because it really revealed all of these challenges, that were existing in rural food systems, kind of below the surface of the water. You know, the real bulk of the iceberg.

Particular I think it's revealed a huge challenge of labor inequality it has largely affected the Latino population, but maybe more notably and more relevant to our time, is the shortages and the surplus of food due to the national supply chain just crashing. From beginning march and going through the summer, what we saw were farmers and supplier scrambling to find a home for their products, and when this was a national scale system, with products and rural communities being shipped out the communities where that



food was grown didn't have that food as a resource when food was in short supply, but neither did the community suddenly that were used to receiving supplies.

So that's where we saw shortages nationally but farmers were still producing, you know, the land was still productive, animals were still productive and so there is this oversupply period. And yet we also saw that school kids being isolated at home. We're not receiving the lunches they typically did. So you know this shortage and surplus due to the national supply chains crashing down was a huge issue, and I think it's reflective of what's been going on for a long time, which is missed economic opportunity in agricultural and specifically rural agricultural communities.

And it's so much capital and energy is just flowing out of rural communities, and that's human capital, natural resources because the food's being produced there, and it's not staying there. And yet there's this, you know, there's this conversation about, like the unraveling of rural America, social fabric, people leaving rural communities, and I'm sure Bob could speak to that being a somewhat rural pastor. But, you know, churches have really seen this. Rural churches have seen this decline in membership, and rural communities generally have seen a decline in population, decline in industry.

What strikes me in my work is that I don't think rural communities are lacking people, and they're certainly not lacking innovative and creative people. Those people, kind of like Bob, are there in our rural communities. I really think it's an issue of investment where businesses and institutions are investing their money and it not being with local farmers, local aggregators and it comes right down to, you know, you and I where we're spending our money.

So, I think there's so much economic opportunity when we think about, you know, hyper localizing our food economies and investing in the farmers that are producing foods so that food can stay in our communities and their revenue is staying in our communities and I have a little statistic here. So, and this comes from the North Carolina Cooperative Extension data. If 25 people spent \$50 a month on local food from a farmer,



then that's \$1250 a month for \$15,000 a year. For perspective, \$15,000 is about what is more than half of what 74% of farmers make in one year.

So it makes a really big difference if we start to think about where our money is going. And what could be possible for farmers and food systems if the individual businesses, churches in that kind of institution pot are really investing in the local food systems.

Luke: Bob what do you think here in Jamie's comments like, how does that resonate with you and what you've seen with rural food systems through your work with my father's cows? What have you learned about cattle farmers in particular and about the issues that are facing them?

Bob: Being led to cattle farming has been a particular blessing because in the measure of agriculture, cattle farming is not a huge industry in North Carolina. Okay, so it doesn't have a high corporate structure to it. I mean, it's just it tends to be more of a family farm thing, or someone has a few Kaiser's. There are large commercial cattle farmers out there. But this is not Texas or Oklahoma. This is on a smaller scale, so it makes it more relational in terms of acquiring cattle.

So that's a good choice for us anyway. I think the ingredient of the church and I identify with the thought that you know rural churches have kind of a struggling in it with a sense of identity right now. And I just want to encourage rural churches that, you know, again, we've all got a role to play in the kingdom, and we all bring a unique involvement to ministry and any rural church that has a heart for mission can do mission. And I think the big advantage for the local church, or local rural church, when it comes to food, is that they have local eyes.

They know these people, they know the farmers, they know the commercial farmers, they know the guy down the road that's got 200 acres of this side or the other. And that's one of the great advantages that they can bring into play is to just kind of leverage those local eyes and the fact that farmer may very well be sitting in their in their



church. And one of the unique things we found was again we're on the edges of the Metro, so I think that has a somewhat of a different impact than being more distant. But we found plenty of local missions that enjoyed receiving the beef.

Okay, so we had not seen those folks before, and so that was good. And then I think another thing that rural churches have to do in particular. And I think this is a part of a kind of strengthening their self-identity is to have a heart for the city. We grow the food out in the country, and I know that's there's some variations to that, but their city recipients, and to take what they grow in the rural regions and make a relation contact with the nonprofits and churches in the urban areas it's a real blessing, and I just think it it's a great partnership.

So we distribute in the city of Charlotte. We distribute out in Cabarrus County on the rural reaches, but we go right downtown as well, and I've laughed about the hauling frozen beefed on the John Belk freeway, you know, in the back of my pickup truck. But, hey, that's how you get it there.

Luke: I love the calling of a pastor. You never know what you're going to be doing. You know, everybody thinks about the preaching and the hospital visits, but they don't think about Hollande beef down the highway, so you just never know. Well, Jamie what else have you seen other churches in our conference in the surrounding area, doing to support rural food systems?

Jamie: Well several examples within the conference come to mind and then, you know, outside of it and the rest of North Carolina. My father's cows is the only beef producer I know. But there's a church outside of Paye Zobel. A farm called still waters landing. That's been raising pigs, specifically pasture raised pigs. And like Bob, they have a very strong value of supporting food ministry efforts in the community. And yet at the same time, it posed a real opportunity to potentially earn income that could sustain the ministry and help it wean off of the grants that previously started and have supported the work, including our own grants.



So they thrive about 50% of the pork produced, and the other 50% goes to brewery and restaurants in the haze bill area. And, you know, last I heard they were doing fairly well, you know, much different from pork. There are several churches, especially since COVID-19 struck that instead of producing vegetables or fruits themselves in small gardens, you know meaningful spaces and productive spaces, but really looking to serve more residents at scale because of the pandemic and economic crisis it's brought.

So there's churches that are purchasing higher volumes of produce from local farmers and either boxing it or using it to prep meals to deliver to school students to deliver to families, to homebound seniors. A lot of these pantries or food ministries report, you know, as high as a 400% increase and food related household needs. So it's really incredible that of all times the churches are, you know, really digging their heels in to the local ground. Being able to both support families, which is kind of on mission with what they've always done but also support farmers.

There's some work in the eastern part of the state where churches have partnered with food aggregators or what we call food hubs. There are actually 8 food hubs across the state, which are doing their own work to source food from local farmers, bring it to a central facility and then either sell it at a wholesale price, sell it retail directly to consumers through online or in person markets. Or, you know, having kind of a philanthropic side and trying to give a portion of that food away through partner ministries.

And then we have churches that are, you know, really growing at scale. There's one near Lumberton, actually in Wilmington, another one in Ellerbe, North Carolina, that, you know both grow over four acres easily of produce for the purpose of either donating it or selling it.

Luke: Bob, what are some future plans that you all have with my father's cows?

Bob: Well, one thing I mean, we're definitely trying to expand our network, and I think the only thing that limits expanding our network is our own initiative. There's just so many potential recipients and, people that we think we can partner with. One thing we're sort of



discovering and that kind of the evolution or nature of developing, not what - we ourselves see ourselves as a nonprofit and some of the funding issues. But some of the larger nonprofits in the urban areas would much prefer to buy cattle directly from farmers. And the price comes in lower.

You know the product, we bring by cutting out all the, you know, processing in the middle and just from the farm, literally farm to table. Not only does the price come down, but we retain the quality, and if you think about it, the blessing in that is we're bringing in measure the best product to some of the most needful folks. And as I've heard people describe, you know where you know, literally creating the king's table and it gets into the dinner fellowship thing and just the opportunity to bring Christian witness.

But some again, some of the larger ones if we can meet their scale of need and just literally try to help create contracts between local farmers and those major recipients, I think that will be a blessing. And again, the whole dinner church thing and Luke, you know, we've been talking about that churches have been closed down, and is there some way we can just encourage them to at some point when the time is right to start up again with their outreach and their dinner programs. And hey, how about how about a Hamburg cookout? You know, come this summer, something like that.

Luke: And Bob, how would a pastor or layperson who's listening learn more about my father's cows? Maybe they want to know how you how you got started or maybe they've got cattle farmers that are friends or church members. Maybe they're just curious about partnering with you all. How would they learn more or get in touch with you.

Bob: Just go to our Facebook page on my father's cows. The contact information is there. I talked with some of this morning. We'll talk to any benevolent farmer in the state of North Carolina. We'll, you know, we'll show up and if their hearts in the right place, we'll make it happen.

Luke: That's awesome. Cool. Yeah, we'll link to that in the show notes.

Bob: Great.



Luke: So you all can look for that. And Jamie so you gave some great ideas on churches, that are connecting with farmers and growing food themselves and connecting with the rural food systems. How would a church get started with that? Say they're starting from scratch. What's the first step?

Jamie: You know, I love what Bob said earlier. How many resources are within the church alone? I think one critical first step is the church assessing, you know, what assets do they have? And also what has traditionally been their lane. You know, what have they been doing food wise, and then what's possible? What could they do differently? When they're assessing their assets, they might find, you know, we haven't underutilized commercial grade kitchen or even just an underutilized, small church kitchen.

But a lot is possible in those spaces. You know, Bob works with a pastor out of Robbinsville that's done an incredible canning program and his youth have one state there, or a county fair ribbons for the products that they've created. And they're really small church kitchen assets like that or even land. There's an incredible amount of underutilized land owned by churches and sometimes even within your congregation or outside of it. There's someone who's looking for land and really just needs that space to produce.

Luke: I've heard Bob talk about land for cattle too.

Bob: Oh man. Totally agree, there's pasture out there and we got to find we got to make connection there.

Jamie: You know, so if they've kind of assess those assets, I think that's equally as important as thinking about the ministry as they've been doing. You know, what could be done differently? Are they really engaging peoples authentically as they hoped? You know, are they doing it with the least amount of harm and for the greatest good, John Wesley, when they started thinking creatively when they started involving both their congregation and the people they've traditionally served, there's kind of a new phrase I'm hearing in, kind of the food bank and free food distribution world pantry participants are really the experts by



experience. So engaging those experts I think a church can go a long way, understanding what they can do more how to conserve better.

Luke: And Jamie how would a church reach out to you to learn more to engage with some of those resources that you mentioned earlier the coaching, the grants. How would they get started with you all?

Jamie: Well, if it's possible to link my email in your notes, I can provide that, you can find us a resourceful communities on Facebook or resourcefullcommunities.org We do have small grants with a cycle coming up a deadline of March 2nd for rural churches specifically that are trying to deepen their food ministries. So I'd really encourage you to reach out if you're interested.

If you've been doing this work if you're trying to, you know, work with local farm partners, we're especially excited to connect rural churches and some of these eight food hubs across the state to increase purchasing partnerships between churches and food hubs to strengthen, you know, and the rising tide that lifts all boats. So that's coming up and I love your churches to reach out to me directly or my colleague Justin.

Luke: Well, Bob Jaime, thank you so much for taking time out of your week to join us to tell us about rural food systems and the farmers and the friends that you all have made. And just yeah, thanks for sharing your insights, your wisdom. And it's been a pleasure to talk to you.

Bob: Oh, my pleasure.

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