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Social Innovation and Health: The Conetoe Garden Story

Note: IEI’s Health Policy Manager Sarah Langer asked Allen Stanton to author this month’s Health newsletter. Allen, a 2015 graduate of Duke’s Divinity School, will be joining IEI in June as our first Rural Church Fellow to support the TRC initiative he describes below.

As part of the Institute for Emerging Issues’ broad effort to promote innovation across North Carolina, IEI has recently partnered with the Duke Divinity School and The Duke Endowment to support their Thriving Rural Communities Initiative (TRC), which helps rural churches expand their support of commercial and social innovation to benefit rural communities. IEI director Anita Brown-Graham discussed TRC in her recent IEI Newsletter, noting that IEI recently hosted a group of TRC pastors and laypersons for a three-day conference that considered what it meant for their churches to be collaboratively engaged in critical challenges facing their communities.

Pastors and other church leaders at the conference repeatedly cited health and wellness concerns in their locales. Many described the “food desert” problem, an issue on which Sarah Langer has written about more than once in this newsletter. For many congregants of

Featured Video

Watch Rev. Joyner and youth leader Tobias Hopkins describe their innovative approach to lifting up youth and community health.

Emerging Issues Commons for Health Issue Engagement

Share your ideas for improving NC’s food system here. (Note: First visit to the Commons? If yes, use the “login” link you find there to create a quick profile.)

Emerging Issues Commons as Key Data Source

How does your county’s adult obesity rate stack up? How about its community health ranking?
North Carolina’s rural churches, full-service grocery stores and healthy eating choices are few and far between.

As key stakeholders in their communities, rural churches are devising innovative solutions to address these challenges. The pastors and laypersons heard inspiring reports from individuals making a difference, including Rev. Richard Joyner, pastor of the 300-member Conetoe Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Edgecombe County. Rev. Joyner noticed immediately upon becoming pastor in 2005 at the church that poor health was a dire community issue. That year, 30 of his parishioners, none older than age 32, passed away, many because poor diet and limited exercise had contributed to obesity and diabetes.

Mobilizing his congregation and other partners in the community, Rev. Joyner began a community garden as part of a new Conetoe Family Life Center. The garden, which is largely led and managed by the youth of the church, offers after-school and summer school programs for students from ages 5-18. Student volunteers plant and harvest crops, manage beehives, and sell produce and honey to restaurants, at farmers markets, and to grocery stores across the state. The proceeds are reinvested in the community to purchase school supplies and fund scholarships.

Rev. Joyner and congregants in a community garden plot.

The Conetoe Family Life Center and its gardens, which now span 15 county locations, have been a resounding success. Inspired by the Conetoe example, twenty-one churches in the region have created gardens, a trend that has helped reduce emergency rooms visits by an astounding 40 percent. The benefits of these efforts do not stop with better health. The local high school graduation rate has risen from 50% to 80%, and more of the church’s youth are heading to college. As Rev. Joyner told conference participants,
“The youth get to take ownership of this. When you take the students to the Farmer’s Market and they get to choose to sell their product and how much to sell it for, it’s empowering, it’s encouraging.”

In 2014, the nonprofit Encore.org, which honors “second career” contributions to the public good, named Rev. Joyner a winner of its Purpose Prize.

Rural churches are uniquely situated within their communities to serve as agents of change. Churches are durable and committed local institutions, and congregants contribute a diverse mix of relationships, expertise, interests, and ideas. Rev. Joyner’s efforts highlight the powerful social innovation that is possible and the ways in which our rural churches can partner with healthcare providers, businesses, schools, and other stakeholders to confront the healthcare challenges affecting so many in North Carolina.

My best, Allen Stanton, guest contributor
IEI Rural Church Fellow (beginning June 2015)

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