

# Program connects growers, churches, hungry families

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Churches have traditionally been known as places that feed the hungry.

Now a unique church-supported program in Benton County, Ore., connects people with their local farmers and provides hungry families with fresh, local produce.

The program, called That's My Farmer, is modeled after a Eugene minister's successful efforts to connect the community with its farmers.

The Benton County program is based on a coupon booklet containing \$18 worth of coupons that are sold for \$20. The extra \$2 or 10 percent of the purchase price goes to buy coupon books for low-income families.

The coupons can be redeemed at farmers' market or farm stands of the participating farmers. The coupon booklets include the names of all participating farms, contact information and where they sell their produce.

St. Mary's Catholic Parish started the program three years ago. Dan Sundseth, the chairman of the social justice commission at St. Mary's and a USDA county director, said St. Mary's imitated the Eugene program and purchased three CSA shares, which they divided among six low-income families.

"That effort wasn't very successful," Sundseth said. "Most of the families were Hispanic, and the food they received in the CSA boxes wasn't a good fit for their preferences."

His church started the coupon program the next year. Last year, with the support of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO), the coupon program grew to include eight congregations and eight farmers.

The churches sold a total of \$12,000 in coupons. Liv Gifford, the program coordinator, said donated coupons amounted to more than \$2,000.

Gifford said, "This year the program will involve 10 con-



Courtesy of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon  
Lia Hubbe, owner of Sweetwell Farm in Scio, Ore., is one of the small farmers in the Benton County 'That's My Farmer' coupon program.

gregations and between 12-15 farmers. We had several new farmers interested in joining. Participating farmers collect coupons and then mail them to St. Mary's Catholic Parish, where we count them and then write a check and mail it to the farmer."

The program, partially funded by a USDA grant, involved the completion of a thorough community food assessment in 2006. The assessment described the local farm market, the prevalence of hunger in Benton County and the role that faith organizations could play in addressing hunger and strengthening local agriculture.

Jenny Holmes, EMO Interfaith Food and Farms director, said, "More than 100 people volunteered to participate. It was a true community project."

The goal of the assessment is to improve the local food system from farm to table. Holmes said, "We're trying to incorporate all aspects of community food—low-income people, farmers, nutrition, culturally appropriate foods. We look at the entire food system, not just one piece of it."

From the farmers' perspective, That's My Farmer coupons are excellent marketing, Gif-

ford said. "We hope the farmers begin building enduring relationships with the community. We encourage them to come and talk to the congregations and invite people for farm visits."

Of the eight farmers who participated last year, two were women. Their farms ranged in

size from 1 1/2 acres to 50 acres.

All of them have some level of commitment to sustainable practices, although they're not necessarily all organic.

Gifford said, "There are people who want this program to get endlessly bigger. We are more interested in operating a quality program and developing quality relationships. Since it's primarily a volunteer program, dealing with all the different congregations requires plenty of time and coordination."

EMO has been working on community food security since 1997, when it began holding workshops in the Portland area. The workshops led to the development of the Portland and Multnomah County Food Policy Councils. The ecumenical group plans to conduct a community food assessment in northeast Portland this year. The goal is for the process to be as participatory as possible, not simply a data-collecting effort, but a community-building project.

Holmes said, "We will rely on members of the low-income community to help shape and conduct the assessment. Ma-

terials will be translated, and we will pay participants a small stipend."

EMO also works to connect immigrant farmers with congregations. Last summer, four downtown Portland churches hosted farm stands after church services for local farmers.

Hmong farmer Yua Lur sold

her flowers at St. Phillip Neri Catholic Church in southeast Portland after Sunday mass.

EMO set up a group of Meskhetian Turkish farmers, political refugees who were resettled in Portland through the assistance of Mercy Corps in late 2005 from Russian, with three area churches.