

“That’s My Farmer!”

A Handbook on Starting a Grassroots Farmers’ Market Coupon Program



Fall 2007

Based on a Project of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon
Linking Farmers, Faith Communities, and People with Low
Incomes

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Appendix will be added to final version. We can send this information by e-mail if you would like.

Appendix A: Sample Coupons

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A Brief History

Nearly a decade ago, The Reverend John Pitney and his congregation, First United Methodist Church (FUMC), began celebrating local, family-scale farming in Eugene, Oregon, emerging out of one of Interfaith Network for Earth Concerns, “A Place at the Table” conferences. FUMC called its efforts “That’s My Farmer” after a folk song John wrote about Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Here’s the refrain:

*Oh, that’s my farmer!
Don’t I have good taste?
We’re taking back our food system!
It needs a human face.
I just can’t wait till Tuesday
To see what’s in our box.
Community Supported Agriculture really rocks!
Harvest bad? Harvest brisk?
We share the bounty, share the risk.
Cheap food gone berserk,
We pay directly, to those who do the work!*

Over time, more than fifteen Eugene faith communities joined the cause. Families gathered each spring to meet local farmers, sing John’s songs about the virtues of local food, and subscribe to the area’s thirteen CSA farms. (Community Supported Agriculture farms are subscription farms, for which customers pay a one-time share fee at the start of the season and receive a share of produce from the farm each week.) They distributed an annual publication called “Action Guide for Faith Communities” and sold coupons to households that preferred not to join a CSA. Extra donations funded CSA shares for low-income households each season.

Fifty miles north of Eugene in the smaller city of Corvallis, members of St. Mary’s Catholic Church were inspired and began promoting Benton County’s two CSA farms within their congregation in 2004. Prompted by feedback that CSA shares were overwhelming to many people and sometimes culturally inappropriate, organizers shifted their approach and sold coupons that could be redeemed at the farmer’s market in 2005.

That year, the “That’s My Farmer” effort in Corvallis became the focus of a USDA Community Food Projects Grant secured by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. With the support of a project coordinator and volunteers, St. Mary’s and EMO expanded the fledgling coupon program to other faith communities and farms in 2006, keeping a critical eye on successes and challenges of the project in hopes of sharing their experiences with other communities throughout the region and beyond.

By 2007, ten faith communities and ten farms joined the program in Corvallis. Ten percent of proceeds from sales were set aside to sponsor coupons for low-income families, distributed via local emergency food providers. Organizers deliberately kept the program small to foster direct relationships between congregations and farmers. Of the ten farms, three are owned and operated by women and two are CSA farms; the farms range in size from two to 50 acres.

Over the course of the 2006 growing season, members of the eight congregations purchased over \$12,000 worth of coupons. \$2,000 in funds were made available to purchase coupons for low-income families.

This toolkit is the result of two years of conversations, interviews, data collection, and analysis of the “That’s My Farmer” coupon program in Corvallis, Oregon. We hope you find it informative and inspiring as you develop similar projects in your own communities.

Purpose of Our Project

The program serves three major purposes:

1. Offering marketing assistance to limited-resource farmers;
2. Urging middle-class members of faith communities to buy locally grown food;
3. Inviting low-income families to visit farmers' markets and farm stands.

The coupon program is designed to raise awareness in the faith community about the importance of supporting local farmers and building justice and equity in the food system. It builds relationships between faith communities and farmers, giving producers and consumers an opportunity to understand each other's circumstances. The program also facilitates low-income residents' participation in farmers' markets and farm stands and increases consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. Finally, it offers new economic opportunities to small farmers by expanding their customer base.

How it Works: Coupon Design, Distribution and Accounting

Design:

We designed our coupon booklets to fit inside wallets and to be attractive and colorful in order to avoid duplication. Each booklet is bilingual in English and Spanish and contains six \$3 coupons. The inside front cover lists the names, hours, and contact information of participating farms, farm stands, and local farmers' markets. The inside back cover is a receipt for charitable contribution, as each booklet represents a \$2 tax deductible donation.

Distribution:

Booklets are made available for sale before or after services at all participating congregations. Volunteers decide on a sales schedule for the season; some choose to sell each week, and some once a month or at special events.

Accounting:

Included in the cost of each booklet is a 10 percent donation toward the sponsorship of coupons for low-income families. In addition, some individuals directly donate to the coupon distribution program. The free coupons are distributed through two local food banks, a gleaning organization, and a social justice coordinator at one congregation.

Coupon Program Tasks and Responsibilities

In this section we have attempted to condense the coupon program into six main task areas. We have included the necessary steps, knowing that each program will take on its own character. This task list should be used as a loose guide. Let the creativity of your community guide you through the specifics of this process!

Recruitment:

- ✓ Decide how many faith communities and farmers to recruit for your program.
- ✓ Recruit faith communities and liaisons to sell coupons and educate the community.
- ✓ Recruit farmers to accept coupons and participate in educational programs.

Coupons:

- ✓ Decide how many coupon booklets to print.
- ✓ Decide how to fund the printing expense.
- ✓ Design and print the coupons.
- ✓ Assemble coupon booklets.

Record-Keeping:

- ✓ Choose a centralized system for financial transactions:
 - Congregations submit money from coupon sales (10% + any additional direct donations go into donation account).
 - Farmers submit redeemed coupons for reimbursement.
 - Coupons are “purchased” using money in donation account for distribution to low-income families.

Education and Outreach:

- ✓ Brainstorm ideas for potential educational programs involving faith communities, farmers, and low-income families (speaking events, farm tours, harvesting help, etc.).
- ✓ Encourage both faith communities and farmers to participate in educational programs.

10% Donation:

- ✓ Choose a means of giving away coupons.
- ✓ Find ways to ensure a high redemption rate.

Communication and Evaluation:

- ✓ Hold frequent discussions and evaluate feedback from program participants: farmers, congregational liaisons, core volunteers, food banks, low-income coupon recipients, etc.

Tips for Success

Program Development and Administration

- Increase leadership capacity at each congregation to reduce volunteer burn-out.
- Add immigrant/refugee farmers to the program.
- Recruit farmers who sell fruit and/or cheese because these sell especially well and add variety.
- Pick five issues related to community food security and develop flyers for distribution at congregations (importance of buying local food, hunger-obesity paradox, impact of corporate farming practices, etc.).
- Use flyers as handouts, and as talking points for bulletins or pulpit announcements.
- Hold regular, face-to-face meetings with farmers and church liaisons (every six weeks works well).

Connecting Farmers and Congregations

- Involve members of a youth group in a “mission trip” to work at a local farm, donating harvest to a food bank.
- Offer farm tours to members of congregations to foster farmer-consumer link.
- Ask farmers to provide a sample of farm fresh foods and a cooking demonstration.
- Collect a sampling of recipes from farmers that feature foods grown on their farms and distribute to faith communities and low-income coupon recipients.
- Have farmers, low-income residents, and faith communities collaborate on a cookbook.
- Do a write-up of each farm to distribute to congregations.
- Invite farmers to attend faith community meals or picnics.
- Promote the program during special services (example: Lenten Season).
- Invite guest speakers to talk about community food security.

Reaching out to Low-Income Populations

- Provide a bilingual handout providing market times and locations, and instructions on how to redeem the coupons.
- Keep instructions short and simple to accommodate those with literacy challenges.
- Arrange a field trip to a farmers’ market, led by a participating faith group.
- Recruit low-income Master Gardeners to help with educational outreach.
- Weigh the pros and cons of bypassing the market and delivering produce directly from the market to food banks to maximize access for low-income individuals.
- Remember low-income folks are diverse—*ask them what they need.*

Reflections from Participants

*“We love the coupon program! We definitely want to continue with it next year,”
Farmer*

*“I’m thrilled with this program. I’m so happy that we’re doing it.” Member of a Faith
Community*

*“I think it has given me a way to express my beliefs in a tangible way...the importance of
creation and the environment; connecting my belief in the importance of the environment
to living out my support for local farmers who care for the land—the antithesis of
agribusiness. I appreciate the opportunity to walk my talk in that respect.” Member of a
Faith Community*

*“What we are doing here is required by our faith, not optional. For us, it’s where it all
started—supporting local farmers and reaching out to others in need.” Member of a
Faith Community*

*“Low-income families who had never been to the Farmers’ Market were worried that it
was just a bunch of yuppies down there. They went and had fun and came back and
reported they were treated like anybody else. We are giving them the opportunity to be a
part of the community.” Food Bank Volunteer*

*“The farmers were very friendly when I asked questions about the vegetables at the
market... When we went to the farm stand, my kids had more opportunity to learn about
where their food comes from—now they make connections between the food they are
eating and how much work it is to produce it.” Low-Income Recipient of a Coupon
Booklet*