

## Engaging Farmers Through Community-Supported Agriculture

### “That’s My Farmer” Event

#### 16 Interfaith Communities

#### Eugene, Oregon

There is a movement in Eugene, Oregon, to connect city dwellers with local farmers. The creative vision of John Pitney, Associate Pastor at First United Methodist Church, brought to life an all-inclusive faith-based event that launched this movement in 1999.

### History

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is typically defined as local support for local farms. People purchase “shares” from the CSA farm for the growing season and receive weekly deliveries of fruits and vegetables. Some CSA farms also distribute such things as meat, cheese and honey. For the past nine years, faith communities across Eugene have come together to connect their members with local CSA farms. An annual event held in April is fittingly titled “That’s My Farmer,” and gives farmers an opportunity to showcase their farms and sign up new members.

From the start, Pastor Pitney began speaking at different churches and worship centers throughout Eugene, educating people about the benefits of joining a CSA farm. He also recruited different faith communities to become partners in the “That’s My Farmer” event. Pastor Pitney never goes anywhere without a sign-up sheet for people interested in becoming a part of “That’s My Farmer” or joining a CSA. The first event in 1999 started with eight farms and six churches. Since then, the event has grown to 16 co-sponsoring interfaith communities and 12 CSA farms. Attendance for the event has also increased each year—more than 400 people attended “That’s My Farmer” in 2008.

### The motivation

Pastor Pitney’s goal is to find more sustainable ways for faith communities to have a positive impact on both the local community and the environment. Supporting local family farms fit the bill perfectly. “That’s My Farmer” has clearly been a success, but there is much more to the event than farmers showing their produce and signing up members. Connections and friendships are made between the farmers and the community members. According to Pastor Pitney, “‘That’s My Farmer’ helps us discover new ways to be the church. Hope is emerging, and it’s cool when churches can take a lead.”

### The project

The “That’s My Farmer” event may take place just once a year, but it takes months of preparation. A coordinating council composed of one or two representatives from each faith community meets at different times during the year—a fall meeting starts the planning process, and meetings continue monthly from January to April. “Each of the faith communities must figure out what’s best for them,” says Pastor Pitney. The faith communities advertise the event along with educating and encouraging their members to join a CSA. Some faith communities have special Sunday worship services that center on the interconnectedness of CSA benefits: the local economy gains; the physical health of community members is strengthened; and the social aspects of connecting farm-to-table are enhanced.



The 2008 event was organized to showcase the farmers and thank them for their hard work. Before the event began, the farmers arrived and set up their tables or booths. At 6:30 p.m., community members mingled with farmers. An “action guide” with information on all of the CSAs was given to everyone in attendance. Cash donations were encouraged to allow the churches to purchase CSA shares for low-income families. The program ran from 7:30 to 8:30, and was kicked off with Pastor Pitney’s song “That’s My Farmer.” Everyone sang along. Farmers were introduced and each given an ovation from the crowd. A brief blessing of the farmers was offered.



Before the event, farmers send suggested discussion questions and Pastor Pitney selects the most thought-provoking of them to explore during the program. Topics include anything from “What gets you up in the morning?” to questions about global warming, local foods and soil fertility. The Mayor of Eugene attends the event and is invited to speak as well. “The goal is to keep it simple and focused on the farmers,” says Pastor Pitney. Another highlight of the evening is when CSA boxes are donated to a domestic violence center from the donations collected that evening. The night is capped off with homemade ice cream for everyone. For Pastor Pitney, it feels good to say thanks to the farmers.

A new twist was added three years ago when “That’s My Farmer Bucks” were introduced. These coupons provide an alternative for those interested in supporting local farmers and eating fresh and healthy foods. The coupons can only be used at farmers markets through farmers who participate in “That’s My Farmer.” Farmers then redeem their coupons for cash through the program throughout the season. These coupons are sold at the “That’s My Farmer” event as well in the participating faith communities. Coupons are worth \$5 and are sold in \$20 bundles. This past year, more than \$11,000 worth of coupons were purchased! Money from any unused coupons goes toward the purchase of CSA shares for low-income families in Eugene. And with a 70 percent coupon redemption rate, that extra money helps even more families find access to healthy foods.

## Lessons learned

The excitement around this program continues to grow in leaps and bounds each year. “I’ve never worked around a community project where the enthusiasm was higher,” says Pastor Pitney. His advice for others interested in starting a similar project is this: “Try to get a team of people in your congregation to work together on this instead of attempting a new project alone. Have patience, and help people discover what talents they possess to make it a success.” Pastor Pitney believes that once people understand the benefits of having a project like this in both their faith community and community as a whole, it is easy for them to work hard to make it a success. As the fall and winter months roll in, “Folks are hot to go for spring,” says Pastor Pitney.

“That’s My Farmer” has had a large impact on the nutrition of those taking advantage of the local CSA farms. “More people are concerned and educated now about buying local, healthy foods,” says Pastor Pitney.

He thinks that people in his community want to feel they are making a real difference. Linda Davies, CSA manager at Winter Green Farm, agrees that they are. Over the last five years, 56 families have signed up for Winter Green’s CSA at the “That’s My Farmer” event. Countless others have purchased shares from other CSAs. The event was “a real eye-opener for me,” says Linda, as she was “blown away by the involvement, dedication and enthusiasm of the faith communities involved.” She enjoys how the farmer-consumer relationships have grown during her time at the farm. “It’s one thing for the customers to know the farmers are out there, but it’s another to get a chance to look them in the eyes.” She also enjoys being able to connect and reconnect with the other farmers at the event.

In 2009 “That’s My Farmer” will celebrate its tenth anniversary. Pastor Pitney is really seeing the fruits (and vegetables!) of his labor. He acknowledges that the help and coordination of volunteers has made “That’s My Farmer” what it is today: a very successful event that connects healthy food and local farmers to consumers in faith communities and the community of Eugene in general. “The story of faith goes along with the story of farms,” says Pastor Pitney.

Excerpt of “That’s My Farmer” song:

*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.*

## Web resources

Oregon Ecology blog entry about “That’s My Farmer”:  
[www.oregonecology.com/2008/04/thats-my-farmer-farmers-gather-for.html](http://www.oregonecology.com/2008/04/thats-my-farmer-farmers-gather-for.html)  
Simply in Season Blog about “That’s my Farmer” coupons:  
[www.simplyinseason.blogspot.com/2006/05/thats-my-farmer-market-coupons.html](http://www.simplyinseason.blogspot.com/2006/05/thats-my-farmer-market-coupons.html)