Food connects us to our bodies, to each other, and to the earth. At its best, it can restore and nourish our bodies and build community as we feed and care for each other. Food is a source of connection, health, and celebration.

But many do not experience food that way. Food in a broken world has become a source of shame, division, inequality, and greed. Far from celebrating community, food for many people is a painful reminder of loneliness and disconnection. Far from restoring the body, food for many is a way to numb painful emotions or to exercise control.

Furthermore, many systems within which food is grown, shipped, and prepared are deeply unjust, exploiting people and land rather than building sustainable communities. Questions swirl around climate change and the sustainability of current agricultural models. Migrant farmworkers in many states can’t afford to eat the food they harvest. And many people have little access to healthy food. In many places, 1 in 5 Americans are food insecure. Racial and ethnic minorities experience diet-related illnesses and lack of access to healthy foods at disproportionate rates.

How can our eating together be a site of grace rather than division? How does the good news of Jesus inform the ways that we cultivate, prepare, and consume food?
Food, Health and The Body: An Invitation

A whole-person, whole-community approach to food is central to Christian faith. From the Garden of Eden, to the Eucharist, to the supper of the Lamb, God centers faithful discipleship around healthy practices of eating together. But Christians have often forgotten this, allowing inequality, unjust food systems, and shame-based approaches to food enter the church’s practices of eating together.

Of course, many churches have taken steps towards engaging food in their communities, notably through programs like food pantries and community gardens. These programs have provided ministry in important ways.

But we believe God is calling us to something deeper.

What is God’s vision for the health of our individual bodies? For the health of the body of the church? How might we come to understand food - how it’s grown, prepared, consumed - differently?

These are the questions we will wrestle with in the Reimagining Health Collaborative (RHC). How can we reimagine health by reimagining food?

We invite churches to spend time in thoughtful prayer, discussion and discernment so that they may see how God is calling them to live and eat together in this world and to build new models for engaging food faithfully.
Program Overview

In congregational life, it is easy to be busy. But busyness does not always lead to wholeness or success. RHC encourages congregations to take the time and space needed to cultivate sustainable, rooted, transformational projects and programs.

First Six Months: Preparing the Ground

- RHC churches will gather a team of 4-10 church members, including at least one staff member, who will be dedicated to engaging this work over the course of 18 months.

- Representatives from the church team will attend the first gathering at Duke Divinity School in Fall 2019. Each team can send up to 4 team members to attend a 3-day gathering from Thursday, October 3rd through Saturday, October 5th, 2019. Here, RHC teams will meet and talk with nationally recognized scholars and practitioners to engage with food theologically and with ministry perspectives in mind. Prior to this gathering, participating teams will begin to explore the congregation’s relation to food.

- After the first gathering, RHC teams engage in a facilitated conversation and discernment process. We’ve partnered with Life Around the Table to offer their framework for conversation, Eating Together Faithfully, to help teams explore food through the lens of scripture and Christian faith. We believe these conversations will help churches discern God’s call into deeper ways of being in discipleship in relation to food and health.
Second Six Months: Plantings Seeds and Helping Them Grow

- RHC teams will reconvene at Duke for a second gathering (2-days/1-night) in spring 2020. We will again engage with scholars and practitioners at the intersection of food and faith, and will consider practical and concrete ways that churches might engage with partner organizations and with their communities.

- After the second gathering, RHC teams return home and start cultivating projects and programs related to food in their community. RHC will offer practical training in naming the vision and mission for the work, identifying resources, and creating a plan to present to church leaders.

Third Six Months: Tending and Harvesting

- In the final phase of the program, churches will fully implement programs to address needs related to food in their community. During this time, they will be supported by relationships with other teams, newsletters and other communications, coaching from the RHC Program Staff, and food-faith partners of RHC.

- RHC churches are also encouraged to consider applying for a Field Education placement for a student from Duke Divinity School. This student’s work with the church could provide vital support for the church’s RHC program. While a student placement cannot be guaranteed, RHC churches will be given special consideration by the Duke Divinity Field Education office.

Program Conclusion: Celebrating the Harvest

- Representatives from each team will attend a final 2-day/1-night gathering at Duke Divinity School in spring 2021, share stories of their work and growth over the past 18 months with one another, and look to the future.

- RHC alumni congregations will continue to have access to Theology, Medicine and Culture and RHC newsletters, webinars and other education and community-building opportunities.
Program Costs and Scholarships

The cost per congregation over 18 months is $5000. This covers event costs (food, conference fees) for team members for three gatherings at Duke Divinity School, all materials costs and project facilitation from an RHC staff member, along with consultation from Duke faculty. RHC relies on the generous contributions of sponsors and donors to help defray the costs of participation for each congregation.

No church should hesitate to apply because of a lack of funds. We are committed to offering at least $2000 of scholarship support for any congregation with an annual budget of less than $1 million. We will also work collaboratively with congregations of all sizes and budgets to secure additional scholarships and sources of funding to support the costs of participation.

In addition, thanks to the generous support of the The Duke Endowment, we are able to provide full scholarship support for up to five TDE-eligible rural United Methodist churches over two cohorts.

Please note: All participating congregations are responsible for their travel costs (hotel, car, air) incurred to attend the three gatherings at Duke Divinity School during the course of the program. Scholarship support does not cover travel costs.

We are committed to hosting a diverse cohort of congregations. Congregations who are concerned that cost of participation would be an obstacle are encouraged to reach out to Rachel Meyer, RHC Program Director, at rmeyer@div.duke.edu.

The Foundations of the Reimagining Health Collaborative

RHC is built upon four core principles of discipleship. They are:

1. Prayer
2. Study
3. Community & Connection
4. Celebration
Expectations of Participating Congregations

Participating in this collaborative means that team members from each church will commit to doing the following:

1. Send at least 2 team members (maximum of 4) to each of the three gatherings at Duke Divinity School. At least one of these members must be a pastor or paid staff member, and at least one must be a layperson.

2. Participate in a congregational discernment process after the first gathering to study the needs of the congregation and to envision new practices. This includes completing the 8 conversations within the Eating Together Faithfully Framework for Conversation book in the six months between the first and second gatherings.

3. Communicate with the RHC Program Director at regular intervals throughout the program to share updates, to process common themes and values arising during team conversations, and to build and adjust strategic plans.

4. Work within their congregation and local community on project/program development, planning, and implementation.

5. Share stories of successes and barriers with fellow participants of RHC, as well as with others who might desire to learn from their experience.
Reflections from Past RHC Participants

“Many of our members were eager to start planning a program and the discernment process of Duke’s leadership has encouraged us to slow down enough to interestingly offer the same for our congregation: time together naming issues and hearing from God.”

“[Being] given the opportunity to gather in solidarity and care for one another has been a blessing. Out of these gatherings, smaller groups of support have formed organically. Some folks now gather in homes and pray with one another. Unknown needs have been communicated and community is resulting.”

“This is the best discipleship experience I ever had.”

“Understanding the tendency to try to “fix” and push straight into programming, we faithfully leaned into the advice last fall to restrain from planning anything specific. While a challenge, we believe it was a very healthy approach that allowed us to wrestle with deeper ideas.”

“Discerning how to begin this ministry at times has been a daunting undertaking, but we have moved forward as a committee “inch by inch”… listening as best we can to the “hunger” in our congregation/community…Being a part of the Reimagining Health Collaborative has been a tremendous help and blessing to our team.”

“The last year has certainly taught us to broaden our notion of inclusivity and to see ourselves as a resource to serve not just those in our congregation but also those in the wider community.”

www.reimagininghealth.org