

**COME TO
THE TABLE**

rafi^{USA}

Food, Faith, & Justice Gatherings Evaluation Summary

In November of 2017, the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) held two Regional Food, Faith & Justice Gatherings in Eastern and Western North Carolina as a follow up to the statewide Come to the Table Conference hosted in March of the same year. RAFI held a third county-specific Gathering in Chatham County in April 2018. The Gatherings were organized by RAFI's Come to the Table program (CTTT).

The Gatherings brought together farmers, food access advocates, and faith leaders and others, and were designed to continue and deepen conversations about equity in our work, build and deepen new and existing relationships, and share experiences and build practical skills. We also provided participants at the November gatherings with the opportunity to meet with technical assistance providers for initial consultations. The Gatherings were kept intentionally to no more than 40 people (including technical assistance providers, facilitators, and RAFI staff) and extended over two days to allow more time for networking, small groups and caucuses, technical assistance consultations, and sharing meals. The Gatherings were held at the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly in Black Mountain, the Franklinton Center at Bricks in Whitakers, and the RAFI office in Pittsboro.

We collected information on the Gatherings through registration forms and evaluation surveys that most participants completed at the end of the event.

Who came to the Food, Faith, and Justice Gatherings?

- The Gatherings hosted 69 attendees in total; 23 at the Eastern Gathering, 27 at the Western Gathering, and 19 at the Chatham Gathering.
- The attendees came from a range of vocational backgrounds, including farmers, health care workers, clergy, community garden coordinators, nonprofit workers, lawyers, business professionals, and more.
- The Gatherings were also attended by technical assistance providers, RAFI staff, and facilitators: 11 at the Eastern Gathering, 15 at the Western Gathering, and 8 at the Chatham Gathering.

Demographics

CTTT strives to provide events and experience that are inclusive and reflect the diversity of lived experiences across the state. In order to check our success with this, we tracked certain demographic information of Gathering attendees during the registration process. By doing so we can understand who is and who is *not* attending CTTT events. With this information we can better tailor our programming and outreach in the future.

The **gender** representation at the Eastern and Western CTTT Gatherings differed with a stronger majority of female participants at the Western (74%) than the Eastern (59%). Unfortunately, a question about gender was mistakenly left off the Chatham Gathering registration form so we are not able to compare gender data with the other two Gatherings. Anecdotally, it seemed that the vast majority of participants at the Chatham gathering identified as female.

The **racial/ethnic identities** represented by the attendees (not including staff or facilitators) at the three Gatherings were as follows:

West: 75% white, 22% black, 3% multiracial

East: 55% white, 31% black, 7% multiracial, 3% native american, 3% no answer

Chatham: 75% white, 13% black, 6% pacific islander, 6% not answered

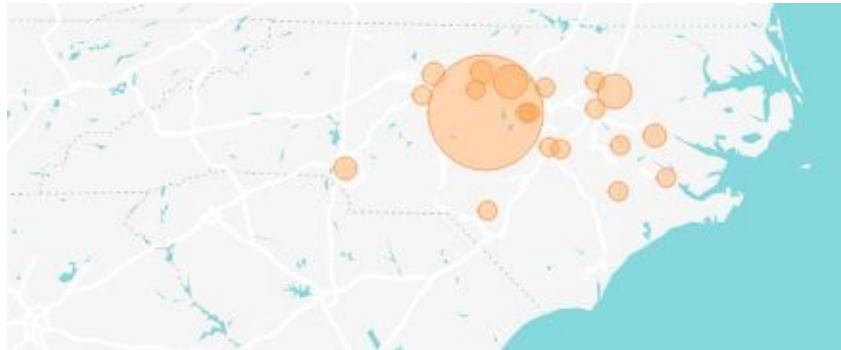
RAFI will continue to expand our network in order for our programming to reach communities of all races, ethnicities, and gender identifications. One area we hope to focus on in particular is increasing our connections with the Latinx community as none of the Gathering attendees identified with this race/ethnicity although almost 10% of NC citizens identify as Latinx (US Census Bureau).

Attendees also indicated the **Religious Affiliation of their Organizations**. Many of the attendees held personal faith commitments, but worked for organizations without any particular affiliations. Attendees were not required to answer this question so this resulted in a low response rate. The majority of attendees (65%) worked for organizations that did not answer or did not have a particular Religious Affiliation. The most common organizational religious affiliation was Methodist at 9%. In the future we may ask for attendee's personal faith commitments instead of organizational affiliation.

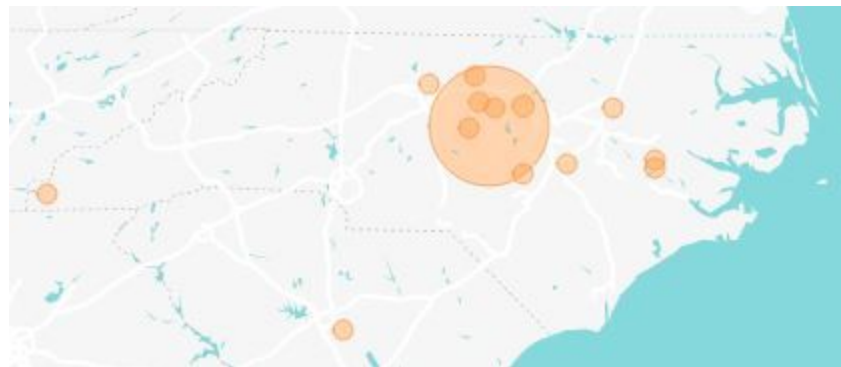
The following three maps represents the **geography** of Western, Eastern, and Chatham County Gathering attendees based on the ticket purchase location. RAFI staff and Gathering facilitators are included in all three maps, many of whom live in the Triangle region, which results in a slightly skewed geographic representation. The Western Gathering had cores of attendees from the Asheville area and the High Country, with the fewest coming from the far western part of the state. The Eastern Gathering had representation from the Northeastern and Central Eastern parts of the state but hardly any attendees from the Southeast. One of our take-aways, both from the locations of those who signed up, and from conversations at the Gatherings, was that "Eastern NC" and "Western NC" are areas that are probably too big for the kind of ongoing networking and connection we hoped the Gatherings would encourage. This was a significant part of our decision to host a third gathering that was focused primarily on one county, Chatham.



Western Gathering (Black Mountain)



Eastern Gathering (Whitakers)



Chatham County Gathering (Pittsboro)

Finally, we asked **what type of organization**, if any, attendees represented at the Gatherings. For both the Western and Eastern Gatherings, representation was highest among nonprofits and community organizations. For both, farmer participation was low or the lowest category of representation. This differs from the Chatham Gathering where almost 1 in 3 participants identified as farmers. Nonetheless we were encouraged that across all three Gatherings we saw participation from a diverse array of churches, nonprofits, farmers, businesses, and community organizations.

Feedback on Gathering Content

Although the agenda for each Gathering was slightly different, the three Gatherings had similar components and structure over the two days. Attendees participated in a Welcoming session where Working Agreements were introduced and accepted. Day 1 also included a keynote address, food and hunger storytelling activity, and time in White and People of Color caucuses. The second day included activities to ground the previous day's conversation about equity into practical approaches. The way we approached this differed between the three events, as we refined our format based on attendee feedback. At all three Gatherings, attendees received a binder of resources relevant to the topics on the agenda.

At the end of each Gathering, we asked attendees to complete an evaluation to provide feedback on the overall quality of the event and give specific feedback on various components over the two days. Across the three Gatherings, there was a 83% evaluation response rate. Most of the questions on the survey had open fields rather than multiple choice answer options, so responses were categorized according to similar themes.

Attendees ranked their satisfaction with aspects of the the **overall event** as well as specific **components of the Gathering** on a scale from excellent to poor. The vast majority of responses from all three Gatherings ranked the overall event and individual components as either excellent or good.

Overall Event							
	Excellent	Good	Average	Fair	Poor	N/A	Weighted Avg.
Western	19	6	0	0	0		4.76
Eastern	7	6	1	1	0	1	4.2
Chatham	13	2	0	0	0		4.87

Individual Gathering Components

The most highly rated components across all three Gatherings included: Speakers and Facilitators, Keynote, and Caucus Spaces. The lower ranked components often differed between events and usually centered on a particular activity. We took this information and reformatted parts of our agenda in an effort to make these sections more useful. One commonality seen between all the Gatherings was lower rankings on the Gatherings Region/County Focus & Region/County-Specific Content. As we planned each new Gathering we tried to incorporate more and more of this localized content. This is reflected in a gradual increase in satisfaction within this category from the Western to Eastern to Chatham Gathering.

While some Gathering components were ranked lower than others, all components received a "Excellent" or "Good" designation from the vast majority of attendees.

When asked about their **favorite part** of the Gathering, attendees responded with various answers, which were coded as follows:

Favorite Parts					
	Keynote/ Speakers	Small Group/ Caucus	Meeting People/ Networking	Learning/Listening	Other Activity
Western	13	4	7	2	5
Eastern	2	1	11	1	2
Chatham	5	7	2	3	3

Many people mentioned multiple aspects of the day as their favorite. At the Eastern Gathering, many people commented how much they enjoyed meeting new people and having conversations in between sessions. One reason why this may have been such a highlight of the Eastern Gathering was the larger venue and overnight stay that allowed people to break off for conversations. Some commented that the Western Gathering venue was a bit small to find quiet places to talk. Because most Chatham Gathering attendees were local and went home at the end of the first day, they missed the opportunity for extended conversations. The keynote by Rev. Dr. Fatimah Salleh at the Western Gathering was mentioned by far as the most favorite part. At the Chatham Gathering, attendees listed the small group discussion groups and caucusing as their favorite parts. Both of these sessions were modified from the Western and Eastern Gatherings based on feedback which may attribute to their higher ranking.

Some notable quotes from the overall evaluations are:

"I valued the diversity of folks present, the container set for truth, vulnerability, and transparency. I appreciated the opportunity to learn more about myself and the ways my movement in the world impacts others"

"Fatimah's presentations were inspiring and set the tone for our meaningful conversations."

"I feel called to take action in educating myself further and to start having uncomfortable conversations."

"[My least favorite part of the gathering is] this evaluation, signaling its end."

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

When asked about their **least favorite part of the Gathering**, people answered about the following components:

Least Favorite Parts							
	Nothing	Lack of Physical Movement	Venue/Food	Pace or Length	Specific Activity	Unclear Next Steps	Other
Western	4	0	4	2	9	0	2
Eastern	1	1	2	2	3	1	1
Chatham	4	2	0	1	0	0	1

The “Other” least favorite part pertained to desire for more faith, food, or regional-specific content. One respondent commented that the “overall tone of the event was negative and divisive.” However, this was a stand-alone sentiment not reflected in any other attendees’ evaluation responses.

An encouraging sign is the decrease in concerns about specific activities over time. The Western gathering attendees mentioned certain activities like a Landscape Assessment, content of the second Caucus break out, and format of large group discussions. The gradual decrease in concerns about specific activities may be reflective of RAFI’s efforts to modify Gathering activities based on previous attendees’ comments. We are also pleased to see several attendees walked away with no least favorite parts.

From the evaluations, three components emerged as the **most useful parts of the Gatherings**.

Keynote Address: The Western and Chatham Gathering keynotes were given by Rev. Dr. Fatimah Salleh. She received very positive feedback from attendees, including the following quotes.

“Fatimah is incredibly vulnerable and has ‘a lot on her back’ -- I can attest to how her words will stick with me.”

“Loved Fatimah’s energy. Where is her church? Invite us to service.”

“[My favorite part of the gathering was] Fatimah’s passion and truth speaking.”

The Eastern Gathering keynote was delivered by Rev. Brandon Wrencher. 15 of 16 people ranked his keynote address as “Excellent” or “Good.” Because of the serious conversations we wanted to cultivate during the Gatherings, the keynote addresses were meant to challenge people’s understandings of equity within food and hunger work and encourage them to engage in further dialogue.

Creating a Space for Dialogue around Difficult Conversations: Some of the words and phrases that frequently appeared on evaluations revolved around the idea of creation of a safer space to discuss the role of equity in people’s lives and work. The keynote, working agreements, and welcoming activity were all listed as ways that we “set the tone for our meaningful conversations.” And by having

an accepting space for honest conversations about equity in people's work, attendees remarked that the discussions - whether in the form of caucuses, small group breakouts, case studies, or after-hour conversations - were fruitful. In addition to creating a safer space for conversations, the evaluations also made it clear that the Gatherings provided an engaging space for active listening. Attendees concluded that some of the most useful parts were listening and learning from the facilitators and other attendees.

"[The most useful part of the gathering was] understanding the importance of active listening and asking questions."

"[I] liked the caucusing as a safe space to gather and talk about healing."

"[My favorite part of the gathering was] the space to learn, share, and process."

Connecting People: The last theme that appeared as a major takeaway from the Gatherings was the opportunity to meet and network with people around the food, faith, and justice topic. Not only were connections made during the Welcome & Introduction section but the incorporation of caucuses, small group discussions, breaks throughout the day, and sharing meals allowed attendees to engage in robust conversations about what they do, how they see food and equity play a role in their community, and the possible applications of the Gathering topics in their own work. We sought to bolster this networking and connection by providing a sheet with contact information of all attendees who wished to share their email and/or phone number.

Gatherings on a Regional vs. County Scale

The scale of the Gathering seemed to play a major role in how useful attendees viewed their new connections and networking. Some responses from the Eastern and Western Gathering indicate that attendees felt that continuing the conversation and collaborating with other attendees would be difficult due to the geographic spread. Also, some respondents mentioned that the issues most important to one region may be very different from another region. In response to this the CTTT team reformatted the third Gathering to a county-specific event. In this way, any new connections made during the Gatherings could be better maintained after the Gathering. And because all attendees would live in the same area, the opportunities for collaboration on the same topic would be much higher. In response to the question "What action do you plan to take based on your experience at the Chatham County Gathering?" several attendees mentioned they would continue to listen and learn within their community. Others said they would re-engage with this work in a variety of ways.

"I plan to at least address racism with our creation care ministry team in deliberation of how that team can be effective in its ministry."

"Re-engage in race equity work - CORE (a community racial equity collaboration) analyzing questions for forming good questions."

"Look for new places to listen and learn stories in my community."

What Attendees Want to See in Future Come to the Table Events

We asked attendees what topics they hoped to see included in future Come to the Table events. Answers to this questions varied significantly between the three Gatherings. In the Western Gathering, several attendees said they wanted to discuss in greater depth how to begin racial equity work in their community. Attendees were looking for tangible skills and training for how to introduce difficult conversations on race and food. Others mentioned a desire for more conversations about equity within the food systems but on a more county or city-specific scale. The Eastern Gathering evaluations overwhelmingly show an interest in discussing how food systems and farming can be used as economic development. Meanwhile, the Chatham evaluations show that attendees are interested in listening to more speakers and having more opportunities to gather with people involved with similar work.

Western Gathering

“...how to engage diverse groups to create more equitable food systems.”

“[At future CTTT events I would like to see more of] what actual conversation around racial equity sound and look like - develop strategy.”

Eastern Gathering

“[At future CTTT events I would like to see more of] small groups coming together under cooperative business models.”

“[At future CTTT events I would like to see more of] how churches can be part of economic development.”

Chatham Gathering

“[At future CTTT events I would like to see more of] gatherings that promote relationships/community building.”

“[At future CTTT events I would like to see more of] specific info about racial inequity in Chatham County. Also want more info or resources to learn about Chatham County lynchings.”

Going Forward

The Come to the Table Team will coordinate at least two regionally-focused Gatherings in 2019 as a follow-up to the conference in March 2019. As we consider what to include in future Gatherings, we can gain helpful insight from the Western, Eastern, and Chatham evaluations.

Geographic Region: In the future, we will continue to do gatherings with a more localized geographic scale, like what was modeled in the Chatham County Gathering. This will allow us to build the gatherings around local issues. It will also increase attendees’ ability to connect and collaborate after the Gathering.

Food and Hunger Content: Although we see an inextricable connection between addressing racial equity and addressing food access and hunger issues, future Gatherings will need to strengthen this connection by including more content about local food and anti-hunger efforts.

Gathering Follow-Up: As we organized three gatherings, we improved the resources, articles, and tools included in attendees' binders. However, we need to consider how we can better help attendees take those new tools, contacts, and conversations and move them to action. Come to the Table also needs to consider how best to follow-up with attendees in the weeks and months after the Gathering to ensure the conversation and work continues.

Staff Recommendations

The Come to the Table staff, Fellows, and facilitators met after the Chatham Gathering to reflect on all three Gathering events and the planning processes. Some reflections and recommendations included:

- Needing to incorporating more food system-related agenda items
- We needed a lot of processing space and caucusing space was the right choice for that.
- We liked that the Chatham Gathering was local, and that we had a smaller group: it was nice that people either knew each other or would get to know each other. A large part of learning environments has to do with class size.
- We need caucusing that is additionally divided with a space for people of color who aren't black: the conversations are different, and being invisible-ized within a people of color caucus hurts extra. This also means that the gatherings also need to be more diverse.
- Facilitators and people keeping track of time should sit next to each other.
- Less sitting, more moving:
 - Can we increase the networking and the not-sitting at the same time? Having people walk and talk, for example.
 - More outside time would be helpful.
- One potential follow-up strategy to evaluate: organizing a follow-up dinner 6 months after a Gathering.