



Dennis Atwood, senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Mount Olive, N.C.



One of two solar farms on land leased by FBC, Mount Olive, N.C.



A New Way of Farming: First Baptist Mount Olive, N.C.

It is not uncommon for churches to be gifted property. In most cases, when a gift of land is made to a congregation, one of two things happens. In many instances, the land is appraised and quickly put up for sale. The proceeds are then used or invested by the congregation. The other common response is for the church receiving the property to hold on to the land with the anticipation of some type of future facilities use. This is most often the case when the gifted land adjoins current church property or when the congregation feels that the land might have some future use for ministry, expansion or a special project. The least likely scenario is for the church to hold the property as an investment with no real plan to expand the church footprint onto the parcel.

Yet, it is this third scenario that was followed by First Baptist Church of Mount Olive, N.C. In 2003, FBC was the recipient of a significant gift from the estate of a church member who had recently passed away. The gift included stock, cash, real estate and over 200 acres of land.

Some of the land was deemed to have very little use and was quickly sold. At the same time, a significant portion of land was seen as valuable for farming. In turn, those tracts were leased at a competitive rate for agricultural use.

For many at FBC, there was a sense that this was how the land would be used for years to come. The property would continue to be leased to area farmers, the church would see a modest yearly return from the lease

agreements and the small farming tracts would remain in the church's possession. Very few could have envisioned the unexpected type of farming that was ahead.

In 2013, Birdseye Renewable Energy was looking for tracts of land in Eastern North Carolina that would be suitable for solar farms. As they explored the area, they came across two of the pieces of property owned by FBC. The company reached out to the church and asked if there was any chance that the congregation would be interested in leasing the property for use as solar farms.

What Birdseye recognized was that much of the land met the basic characteristics of what is needed for solar farming. The parcels were the right size. The land was flat and open. And, the tracts of land were in great locations. One piece of property was very close to a primary commercial district of Mount Olive. The other piece of property was further from the city limits but an electric substation was within walking distance and thus the solar energy generated could easily be routed through the nearby station and on to customers.

Church leadership was intrigued and welcomed the opportunity to at

least explore the possibility of solar panels on their farmland. To their credit, the FBC Mount Olive Trustees who represented the church in the process, committed themselves to learning everything that they could about solar farming. Over time, Birdseye and FBC got to know each other and further exploration was made to ensure that the land could be used in this way and that it satisfied both federal and local government and energy requirements.

Ultimately, within a year, Birdseye and the church moved from that initial phone call to reaching an agreement whereby the church would lease land to the company in the form of two tracts with one parcel being 38 acres and in the other being 39 acres in size. The properties are leased through 2044 and return 400% more in income per year than would have been the case had they remained leased for traditional farming.

AN EXPANDED VIEW: THE BENEFITS OF SOLAR FARMING FOR FBC MOUNT OLIVE

A significant part of the solar farm story at FBC Mount Olive is the numerous ways the experience has impacted the church both financially and otherwise. One result has been the way that the experience

has expanded the horizons for the church related to facilities, property and ministry. Today, when Dennis Atwood, the pastor of FBC, talks about the solar farms, the church and the church's engagement with the community, he does so in ways that clearly convey the importance of living with a posture of possibility and an attitude of openness. In essence, the solar farm experience has helped both Atwood and other church leaders to appreciate and embrace the idea of how limitless possibilities really are in so many situations.

Another clear benefit of the solar farms is that they have helped the church to think more clearly and personally about what it means to care for the environment. Solar energy is clean energy. It is a way to be a good steward of the earth. As the church has learned about all of this, they have thought deeper about other ways to care for God's creation and about how they themselves can play a key role in this work. FBC Mount Olive's perspective on creation care and its role in the life of the church and in the development of a strong Christian theology likely would not be where it is today without their direct experience with solar farming.

Of course, the major benefit for the church has been the financial blessing

that has come its way as a result of the solar farming venture. Again, the revenue generated by the farmland has grown 400% as the lease on the property has transitioned from traditional farming to solar farming. It has all certainly eased the financial challenges of the church. Yet, the entire Mount Olive community has also benefited. In fact, First Baptist is currently working on a new ministry initiative called The Gratitude Project through which the church plans to provide \$100,000 to identified community partners who are working to alleviate poverty, improve affordable housing, provide educational needs for children and youth or to support economic development among the poor in Mount Olive. A financial gift of this size given to community groups to support their work is a direct result of the earnings being generated by the two solar farms.

CLEAR COMMUNICATION: MITIGATING CONCERNS & CHALLENGES

Any time a church steps out in a direction that is unique or where there is little precedent, it can be a challenging decision. In the case of FBC Mount Olive, those challenges seem to have been averted due in large part to the fact that there was clear, constant and honest

conversation each step of the process. From the moment that the idea was first suggested all the way to the point at which the solar panels were operational, honest, open conversation was a priority. In fact, in talking with church leaders who were involved in those initial months of exploring the idea with both Birdseye and the congregation, they point out that their goal was always to “over communicate.”

Beyond their ongoing conversation with church leadership, Birdseye provided a representative for all of the church conferences at which the potential solar farm was discussed. The representative was able to answer questions and serve as a real point of contact between the church and the company.

Further, the church leadership that worked hand in hand with Birdseye also tried to be transparent with the rest of the congregation. They created a chart that showed projected earnings for the life of the contract and made sure that the congregation understood clearly what was being asked of the church and what Birdseye’s responsibilities would be.

The church leaders also did their best to address concerns such as the fear

of what would happen if Birdseye walked away from the project after the panels were up and operational or the worry over whether this was the best use of the property in an area where there were numerous traditional farms and where agriculture was very important.

The presence of Birdseye representatives, the transparency of church leaders with other members of the congregation and a willingness to be open to try to address all worries, concerns and fears helped the church to feel good about the unique opportunity. This element of the FBC Mount Olive and Birdseye story also clearly demonstrates how critical open conversation can be. Trying to make information as accessible as possible certainly does not always resolve all challenges or issues but it almost always helps to allow for a smooth process.

A MODEL THAT CAN BE REPLICATED

When one first hears the story of FBC Mount Olive and its two solar farms, the initial reaction might be to conclude that this is a great story but not one that can be reproduced. Yet, one of the things that Atwood and FBC Trustee Angelo San Fratello are quick to point out is that

other churches should explore this opportunity.

What Fratello is quick to share is that there are a few basic elements that make a site potentially desirable for solar farming. First, the best sites are in the 35-40 acre range. Sites that are smaller do not provide a strong enough return on investment for the companies who lease the land. Sites that are larger are generally too big to receive government approval. Second, tracts also need to be level and very open in order for direct sunlight to be plentiful. Third, the farmland cannot be too remote or at least it needs to be relatively close to a substation of some type. Finally, the acreage needs to be located in a community where the local power company is interested in bringing on initial or additional solar energy to the electrical system. While all of the stars certainly have to align, and while there are other elements that go into a piece of property having potential as a solar farm, many of these factors are not as unique as one might think.

Atwood adds a unique perspective on rural congregations like FBC Mount Olive. He points out that so often, rural churches have members with lots of land. In turn, a strategic conversation might involve asking

members to at least consider leaving a small portion of their land to the church in their will or to gift a small portion of their land to the church while they are alive. Many people might not have an abundance of cash or other possessions that they could give their church or leave to their congregation at their death. But, they may have an abundance of land and might be open to giving a small or large piece of property to their church.

Of course, the best scenario is for the church leadership to be a part of such a possible gift from the very beginning and thus engaged in evaluating how the church might use the property in either a traditional or creative way. Yet, Atwood's point is well taken. There are emerging ways that congregations can use property as a revenue-generating asset beyond simply selling the land or holding onto it for future expansion. Solar farms, traditional agricultural, leasing land for a commercial development and other possibilities broaden the horizon in exciting and potentially lucrative ways. The example of Mount Olive First Baptist Church opens a world of possibilities for churches to explore.