

**No. 0126**

(Sense-of-the-Assembly)

**FARM WORKERS, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND THE CHURCH**

ADOPTED by the General Assembly

**Background Information**

Eighty years ago the church began a response to the plight of migrant and seasonal farm workers. The beginning was small in 1920 when an interdenominational group of church women in New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware established four migrant day care centers. These programs included Sunday worship, Sunday School classes, child care/nursery services and emergency help with food and clothing. Similar programs soon spread to other states. By 1939 church-sponsored migrant work was occurring in 15 states, and by the 1950 s migrant ministry programs existed in 38 states with formal support and sponsorship from state Councils of Churches and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

Through this hands-on type of involvement women of the church developed a deeply felt and disturbing awareness of the harsh circumstances of migrant farm work. Their influence enabled the church to realize that the real need was for radical change in the conditions of life that brought unrelieved misery to migrants wherever they worked.

Early in the 1960 s farm workers themselves began to think in terms of organizing for change. In California a young Mexican-American farm worker, Cesar Chavez, began an organizing effort that became the United Farm Workers Union (AFL-CIO). And, in Ohio the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) developed under the leadership of another young migrant worker by the name of Baldermar Velasquez who organized tomato and cucumber workers in the mid-west.

Simultaneous to these developments in 1971 the National Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches became the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM), and the emphasis shifted from social services to servanthood in which the church worked with farm workers in their self-determination through organizing, boycotts, strikes, protest actions and political advocacy.

During the mid 60 s and mid 70 s, significant gains were achieved by workers in grape vineyards and tomato, cucumber and lettuce fields. Upwards of 150,000 workers came under contract protection. In 1975 the nation s first comprehensive legislation was passed by the California State Assembly. The California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (CALRA) was enacted with strong support by farm workers and their allies in the church.

Regretfully a majority of farm workers still live and work under the same harsh conditions that have always been their lot. Too often they must live in cardboard shacks, abandoned cars or trucks, dilapidated housing without running water, heat or window screens, and sometimes on the ground under an open sky. Too often children who ought to be in school or under child care protection have no alternative to staying with their parents in the field. Too often there are abusive foremen putting unreasonable demands on workers. Always there are unsanitary facilities, low wages and long, hard back-breaking work. Rarely are there any of the ordinary benefits and protections given to other workers.

Nevertheless, through self-determination efforts of farm workers, along with support from the church through the National Farm Worker Ministry, there are today bright and encouraging signs of progress and hope for farm workers. Thousands of farm workers are still under union contract protection that offer decent wages, benefits and improved working conditions. Most important perhaps is the dignity and self respect that farm workers have gained.

The following, for example, are some of the products resulting from farm workers under contract with the United Farm Workers Union:

Strawberries (Swanton Berry)

Roses (Armstrong, Jackson and Perkins Meiland)

Other Flowers and Nursery (Robert Hall, Inc., Waller Flowerseed Co.,  
L. E. Cooke)

Wine (Chateau St. Michelle, Columbia Crest, Saddle Mountain, Farrow Ridge  
Premium, Red and White only, North Charles Krug, Gallo of Sanoma:  
Gallo Estate, Rancho Zabaco, Anapamu, Marcelina, Undigo Hills,  
Turning Leaf)

Apples (Mann s CA Apples)

Table Grapes (Sunpower)

Dates (Brown Date Garden)

Vegetables (Maranaka\*, Balleto, Sonza-Boster, Red Coach lettuce)

Mushrooms (Monterey Mushrooms, California only, Vlastic Farms California  
only Family Farms Mushrooms, Prime Mushrooms)

Citrus (Sunkist\*, Sunworld\*, Airdrome, Big Jim\*)

Almonds (Montpelier)

[\*only with UFW Black Eagle label]

Contracts with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) AFL-CIO are:

Pickles (Vlastic, Green Bay, Heinz, Aunt Jane, Dean Foods Ohio only)

Contracts with Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN) in Oregon are:

Blueberries (Natures Fountain Farm)

Chestnuts (Thomas Paine Farms Oregon only)

For all of these reasons it is urgent that the church be in partnership with farm workers in their continuing struggle for the better life they want for themselves and their children.

WHEREAS, for more than 20 years the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) gave active support to farm workers in their struggle for social justice by participating with the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM); and

WHEREAS, the NFWM continues to give critically needed support to migrant and seasonal farm workers by living out its purpose as a movement within the churches to be present with and support farm workers as they organize to overcome their powerlessness and achieve justice) equality and freedom ; and

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, July 13-17, 2001, expresses endorsement of the National Farmer Worker Ministry (NFWM) and its good and important work with migrant and seasonal farm workers; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Division of Homeland Ministries explore possibilities to renew relationship with the National Farm Worker Ministry through existing Disciples and ecumenical networks to provide a Disciples witness and presence in ministry with farm workers; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Assembly commends those regional offices and congregations that already support farm workers, and encourages all regions and congregations to give support to migrant and seasonal farmers wherever they are throughout the country.