

1  
2 **NO. 0920**

3  
4 **(OPERATIONAL BUSINESS ITEM)**

5  
6 **RENEWING DISCIPLES SUPPORT FOR FARMWORKER MINISTRY**

7  
8  
9 WHEREAS, over two million migrant and seasonal farm workers labor in the fields, orchards,  
10 vineyards and groves of America; and

11  
12 WHEREAS, the average wage for migrant and seasonal farm workers in the United States is  
13 \$11,000. The great majority lack health insurance and all other simple protections enjoyed by  
14 most other workers; and

15  
16 WHEREAS, their labor is vital, since their work provides the food we eat daily; and

17  
18 WHEREAS, migrant and seasonal farm workers face many dangers and have many needs. They  
19 often suffer poisoning from toxic chemicals, pesticides and herbicides. Pregnant women have  
20 been known to give birth in the fields while working. Some workers have died from heat,  
21 exhaustion and dehydration. Small children must often accompany their parents in the field.  
22 Workers often endure insult, harassment and abuse of many kinds from labor contractors,  
23 employers and crew bosses; and

24  
25 WHEREAS, Christians are instructed by scripture and the teachings of our faith to have  
26 compassion for the poor and oppressed; and

27  
28 WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has a tradition of more than eighty years of  
29 support for migrant and seasonal farm workers through the National Farm Worker Ministry  
30 (NFWM), an organization comprised of more than thirty denominations; and

31  
32 WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) needs to resume our ministry of justice  
33 with migrant and seasonal farm workers that was halted in 1994 due to declining budgetary  
34 resources; and

35  
36 WHEREAS, the Disciples Home Missions (DHM) in recent years has provided assistance in the  
37 development of a new organization (the Disciples Farm Worker Ministry – DFWM) and has  
38 given encouragement in the effort to resume Disciples participation with the wider  
39 interdenominational community working together through the National Farm Worker Ministry  
40 (NFWM);

41  
42 THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) renew its  
43 relationship with the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM), thus renewing a Disciples  
44 commitment to work with other Christians in this ministry of justice with migrant and seasonal  
45 farm workers; and

46  
47 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) resume its support for

48 migrant and seasonal farm workers through the new organization known as Disciples Farm  
49 Worker Ministry (DFWM), affiliated with the Disciples Home Missions (DHM); and  
50  
51 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DFWM develop a program of support and participation in  
52 the work of the NFWM; and  
53  
54 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DFWM designate a person or persons to represent the  
55 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with the Board of the NFWM; and  
56  
57 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DFWM recruit and enlist persons from Disciple  
58 congregations to be participating members of DFWM; and  
59  
60 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DFWM provide information about farm workers for the  
61 purpose of educating and engaging concerned individuals and churches with the needs and  
62 activities of farm workers; and  
63  
64 FINALLY, BE IT RESOLVED that the DFWM establish a budget for its work seeking funds to  
65 support the work of its ministry. All funds will be received through DHM for appropriate  
66 accountability of reporting and expending.  
67

68  
69 Compton Heights Christian Church, St. Louis, Missouri  
70 Downey Avenue Christian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana  
71

## 72 **BACKGROUND**

73  
74 There are over two million farm workers in the United States who labor in our fields and  
75 orchards, dairies and feedlots. Without them, our multi-billion dollar agricultural industry  
76 would not survive; 85 percent of our fruits and vegetables are still handpicked. Yet farm  
77 workers annual wages are only \$11, 000, with some workers making much less. Workers often  
78 pick for “piece rate” still earning only 45 cents per 32 lb bucket of tomatoes, or 85 cents per 90  
79 lb sack of oranges. The majority receive no health benefits, overtime pay, or sick leave.  
80 Thousands of workers experience pesticide related illnesses every year and suffer other  
81 unhealthy and unsanitary conditions in the fields, even dying in the fields from heat exposure.  
82 Women frequently suffer sexual harassment. Most farm workers are immigrants and many lack  
83 legal status, leaving them vulnerable to being fired or deported if they complain about abuses.  
84

85 Churches have worked cooperatively with farm workers for over 80 years, first as state based  
86 ministries, providing food, clothing, daycare and worship services to workers. When Cesar  
87 Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, began organizing in the 1960’s he called on the  
88 church to move from charity to justice, to support their organizing efforts for empowerment  
89 and justice in the fields – for the means to buy their own food and clothes. In 1971, the  
90 National Farm Workers Ministry (NFWM) was founded as the vehicle for national  
91 denominations, regional religious bodies, religious orders, and concerned individuals to  
92 respond to that call. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was a founding member of  
93 NFWM.  
94

95 While supporting important legislative and regulatory efforts led by farm workers, such as the  
96 right to shade and drinking water in extreme heat, the biggest improvements in farm worker  
97 working conditions have come about through labor agreements. National Farm Worker  
98 Ministry's 36 years of service with farm workers has convinced them that such agreements are  
99 the workers' best hope for real change in the fields, enabling enforcement of laws and  
100 regulations within the industry, making it possible for workers to speak up without fear of being  
101 fired.

102  
103 Under the leadership of Arturo Rodriguez, Cesar Chavez's successor as President of the United  
104 Farm Workers (UFW), the UFW won contracts over the last ten years with: the nation's largest  
105 strawberry employer, Coastal Berry Company; a major rose company, Jackson and Perkins; the  
106 D'Arrigo company, employing over 1800 workers who pick lettuce, broccoli and other  
107 vegetables; the majority of California's mushroom companies; and several others. They also  
108 won contracts with Chateau St. Michelle, Washington's largest winery and have successfully  
109 renegotiated that three times. The UFW also won the largest contract for farm workers in  
110 Oregon history covering three hundred workers at the mega-dairy Threemile Canyon Farms.  
111 These agreements provide workers not only with improved pay and working conditions, such  
112 as toilets and clean drinking water in the fields, but also with a pension plan, sick and vacation  
113 days, health benefits, and perhaps most importantly, a seniority system and grievance  
114 procedure to address problems on the job.

115  
116 The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) under the leadership of Baldemar Velasquez won  
117 the first union contract for farm workers in North Carolina and the first contract covering H2-A  
118 guest workers. Some 7,000 cucumber, sweet potato and tobacco pickers won protections  
119 under the landmark agreement with the North Carolina Growers Association and Mt. Olive  
120 Pickle Company in 2004; that contract was extended in 2008. Among the contract provisions  
121 the "guest workers" won a right to bereavement leave to return home for a death in the family.  
122 The contract has also helped prevent further death in North Carolina's fields where some nine  
123 workers died in recent years, some of preventable heat stroke.

124  
125 In Florida, a community organization known as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) won  
126 historic agreements with Taco Bell, McDonald's, and Burger King, when the fast food  
127 companies agreed to pay a penny more per pound for their tomatoes with the provision that it  
128 be passed on to the workers picking their tomatoes. The Coalition was also given a role in  
129 enforcing a code of conduct in the fields, particularly related to the indentured servitude that  
130 still exists in Florida and elsewhere.

131  
132 Farm workers were excluded from many of the laws protecting other workers, including the  
133 National Labor Relations act, designed to provide workers protections for organizing. Thus they  
134 have only won agreements such as those above with public support. The support of the faith  
135 community in particular has been critical because of its moral voice, its large constituency, and  
136 because its presence offers the workers hope and affirmation for the risks they take.

137  
138 Farm workers are the first to say that they could not have won what they have without the  
139 support of the religious community. But the sad reality is that they apply to a minority of farm  
140 workers nationwide; there is much work to be done before we can rest easy at our tables. It is

141 imperative that people of faith continue to stand by farm workers as they carry on with hope  
142 and determination to create a better life for themselves and their families.

143

#### 144 **THE ROLE OF THE DISCIPLES**

145

146 The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was an active participant in this ministry from the  
147 beginning. Individuals from congregations have worked as volunteers with migrants, and our  
148 church was among the denominations which founded the National Farm Workers Ministry in  
149 1971. The International Convention and the General Assembly have consistently endorsed and  
150 encouraged this ministry with farm workers.

151

152 In 1966, the International Convention approved Resolution No. 75 entitled Concerning  
153 Economic Justice For Agricultural Workers saying: "... scripture enjoins us to be concerned with  
154 justice for the poor, the stranger and the oppressed." Citing Amos 2:6-8 and 5:21-24, Micah  
155 6:10-15, and James 5:1-6, Resolution No. 75 said: "that this Assembly go on record as  
156 supporting the principal of legislation to include farm workers under the provisions of the  
157 National Labor Relations Act of the United States and the Industrial Relations and Disputes  
158 Investigation Act of Canada so that they may form voluntary associations and bargain  
159 collectively with their employers; and that this Assembly urges that the permanent church  
160 related migrant ministry staffs... be encouraged to solicit the cooperation of local churches and  
161 parish clergy to assume their rightful responsibility of farm laborers to achieve dignity and an  
162 adequate standard of living...."

163

164 In 1973, in Resolution No. 7343, the General Assembly meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio, reaffirmed  
165 support for the right of farm workers "... to organize and join a union of their own choosing and  
166 to engage in collective bargaining with employers." and "...that regional offices of the Christian  
167 Church (Disciples of Christ) be requested to assist in the task of helping members of churches to  
168 understand the issues involved in the right of farm workers to organize for and engage in  
169 collective bargaining with employers."

170

171 In 1975, the General Assembly meeting in San Antonio approved Resolution No. 7556 which  
172 called on "units, agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Christian Church (Disciples of  
173 Christ) to refrain from purchasing or serving iceberg (head lettuce) or table grapes or Gallo  
174 wines unless they bear the UFW Aztec eagle label."

175

176 Resolution No. 0314 was approved by the General Assembly meeting in Charlotte, North  
177 Carolina, in 2003 calling for express endorsement of the National Farm Worker Ministry and  
178 encouraging a Disciples witness and presence in ministry with migrant and seasonal farm  
179 workers. The resolution endorsed the boycott of "all Taco Bell restaurants and products (taco  
180 shells, sauce, refried beans, etc.) sold in groceries until such time when Taco Bell brings  
181 together representatives of Taco Bell, their Florida suppliers and representatives of Immokalee  
182 workers to discuss solutions to the needs and rights of immigrant workers." This boycott was  
183 successful in getting Taco Bell to sign an agreement with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers  
184 (CIW) of South Florida which was the first for a fast food company.

185

186 Most recently, the General Assembly meeting in Portland, Oregon, in 2005, approved  
187 Resolution No. 0517 that called on church members to "...support movements that address the

188 living wage and cooperate with workers, employers, labor unions, and organizations that are  
189 working to affirm workers' dignity.”