

Sí, se puede

**Celebrating Holy Week and
National Farmworker Awareness Week
2013**



North Carolina Council of Churches
Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

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Mural by Student Action with Farmworkers



Introduction

Holy Week this year is also Farmworker Awareness Week. It seems like no accident that the week in which we celebrate Jesus' service and sacrifice for humanity is the same week that we celebrate the extraordinary gifts that farmworkers offer to our communities.

It's a time when we both remember and look for hope even in the midst of oppression, new life even in the midst of dehumanization.

Farmworkers do some of the hardest, most dangerous work in our society, yet often go unrewarded. We believe that every worker, no matter his or her occupation, should have safe places to live and safe places to work. And we believe that the laws protecting field and poultry workers should be strongly enforced so that no unscrupulous employer will have financial incentives to skimp on worker safety.

To celebrate Holy Week and Farmworker Awareness Week 2013, we've prepared this simple packet of resources. In it, you'll find Bible passages, prayers and responsive readings, and several theological reflections.

We invite you and your congregation to join us in taking action. Here are several important ways that you can get involved:

- Preach a sermon about farmworkers;
- Include farmworkers in your congregation's prayers or liturgy;
- Coordinate a Sunday School class or series about farmworkers. We have a free curriculum available online here: www.ncchurches.org/2010/08/hands-of-harvest-hearts-of-justice
- Host a community meal (with farmworkers if possible) and highlight the contributions that farmworkers make. There is a meal packet of ideas and information available online here: <http://nfwf.org/2009/06/planning-a-harvest-of-justice>
- Show the free documentary film *Harvest of Dignity*. You can view the film and download the free study guide here: www.ncchurches.org/2012/09/harvest-of-dignity-film-and-study-guide-now-available
- Ask your congregation how they would like to get involved.

During this most holy of weeks, we invite you to join with people of faith across North Carolina and the country as we work together to make sure that no one is excluded from our communities.

About the NC Council of Churches

Since its inception more than 75 years ago, the North Carolina Council of Churches has used Christian values to promote unity and to work toward a better tomorrow. This is reflected through the Council's motto: "Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice."

Today, the Council consists of eighteen member denominations, with more than 6,200 congregations and about 1.5 million congregants across North Carolina. The Council enables those denominations, congregations, and people of faith to impact the state on issues of health and wellness, climate change, immigration policy, farmworker rights, legislation, and much more.

Over the past two years, the Council has also focused on a theme connecting each of these issues, food, helping people of faith learn about this most basic necessity for survival, how it relates to our beliefs, and how those two intersect.

To learn more about the Council and its work, visit www.ncchurches.org.

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Written, edited and designed by Chris Liu-Beers,
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Photo courtesy of National Farm Worker Ministry - NC

Bible Passages about Farmworkers

From the laws of ancient Israel to the life of Jesus and the letters of Paul, themes related to the treatment of farmworkers emerge consistently throughout the Bible. Many of these passages suggest that a community's relationship with God is in fact defined at least in part by its treatment of foreigners, laborers, the poor, and the marginalized. All texts are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Old Testament

There shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you.

~ *Exodus 12:49*

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

~ *Exodus 23:9*

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.

~ *Leviticus 23:22*

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

~ *Deuteronomy 10:19*

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

~ *Deuteronomy 24:14-5*

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

~ *Psalms 126:5-6*

The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.

~ *Proverbs 13:23*

If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever.

~ *Jeremiah 7:6-7*

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages.

~ *Jeremiah 22:13*

The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and

have extorted from the alien without redress.

~ *Ezekiel 22:29*

The word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

~ *Zechariah 7:8-10*

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against... those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

~ *Malachi 3:5*

New Testament

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

~ *Matthew 25:35*

'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

~ *Luke 10:36-37*

Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due.

~ *Romans 4:4*

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

~ *Romans 12:13*

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

~ *Romans 13:8-10*

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

~ *Philippians 3:20*

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

~ *Hebrews 13:2*

Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

~ *James 5:4*

Worship Resources

Responsive Reading

When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So, it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of people we are. It is our deepest belief that only by giving do we find life.

For whosoever would save his or her life will lose it, and whoever loses his or her life for Jesus' sake, will find it.

But God did not promise us that the world would be humane and just. God gave us the gift of life and allows us to choose the way we will use our limited time on earth.

Therefore, choose life that you and your descendents may live.

Our struggle is not easy. Those who oppose us are rich and powerful and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our bodies and our spirits and the just nature of our cause.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than humankind, and the weakness of God is stronger than humankind.

We can choose to use our lives for others to bring about a better and a more just world for our children. People who make that choice will know hardship and sacrifice. But if you give yourself totally to the non-violent struggle for peace and justice, you also find that people will give you their hearts and you will never go hungry and you will never be alone. In giving yourself, you will discover a whole new life full of meaning and love.

But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary: they shall walk and not faint.

What do we want the churches to do? We don't ask for more cathedrals. We don't ask for bigger churches or fine gifts. We ask for its presence with us, as God among us. We ask the churches to sacrifice with the people for social justice, and for love of brother and sister. We don't ask for words. We ask for deeds... a multitude of simple deeds for justice, carried out by men and women whose hearts are focused on the suffering of the poor and who yearn, with us, for a better world. Together, all things are possible!

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you.

Amen.

(from Scripture and the words of César Chávez, found at the National Farm Worker Ministry website, www.nfwm.org, under "Worship Resources.")

Prayer of Intercession

Let us seek God's help in the struggle for justice for farm-workers. For the workers who harvest the food that comes to our tables, may they have a living wage. Lord, hear our prayer. May the seeds of our actions produce a harvest of justice. For the fruits of decent housing, health care, and hope for the future. Lord, hear our prayer.

May the church be filled with the Holy Spirit to be in solidarity with the workers. For strength to the organizers who work for the fruits of justice. Lord, hear our prayer.

God bless our hearts and our hands in this harvest of justice. Amen.

(from the National Farm Worker Ministry, www.nfwm.org)

Prayer for Mindfulness

Let us begin by recalling the words of César Chávez: "Every time we sit at a table at night or in the morning to enjoy the fruits and grain and vegetables from our good earth, remember that they come from the work of men and women and children who have been exploited for generations..." Almighty God, too often we don't pay attention, we don't stop to think that, even in this day and age, injustice remains an invisible ingredient in much of the food that we eat. Shake us awake, O God, open our eyes to see our power and obligation as consumers to help put things right. Justice demands it. Love demands it. Amen.

(from National Farm Workers Ministry, www.nfwm.org)

God of Blessing and Bounty

God of blessing and bounty, we praise you for the wonders of this creation. As we see the table before us, we know that you have provided us with more than enough to meet everyone's need. We celebrate the planting and harvest of your good gifts.

We also know, God of justice and mercy, that there are many people who have not been invited to enjoy the bounty of this table and this nation. We are mindful that many of the uninvited are the workers who made this meal possible. They have often suffered grave injustices in body, mind, and soul because of their labor on our behalf. Forgive us, we pray, for taking their labor lightly and for remaining silent as we enjoy the fruits of their harvest. May this food and fellowship nourish in us a heart of justice and gratitude until we taste the fruit of a just labor for all.

Amen.

(from Interfaith Worker Justice, www.nicwj.org/materials/materials_binserts.html)

Reflection: Farmworker Church

For the past two years, I have been a part of a Duke Divinity School group called *Caminantes*. We are a group of students who feel called to minister with Hispanic communities both in the United States and abroad. To cultivate our ministerial skills, we gather weekly for spiritual formation meetings where we read the Bible, sing worship music, and pray – all in Spanish. For some of us, Spanish is a second tongue. For others, it is a mother tongue. In addition to these gatherings, we also visit local Hispanic ministries and go on excursions to Hispanic communities. Our first *Caminantes* excursion of the year brought us to a farmworker house in Stem, North Carolina.

We went to Stem to learn about a transformative experience taking place in the life of one of our Divinity School classmates. Last year, as this student pastor was studying in his parsonage, he noticed a group of farmworkers loading onto and unloading from a bus as they made their morning and evening commutes from their house to the fields each day. After a few weeks of observation, the student pastor (who knew very little Spanish) crossed the street to introduce himself to his neighbors. In subsequent visits, he brought bilingual colleagues and began to form thirteen new friendships.

When we arrived in Stem on a Sunday around 3PM, the farmworkers weren't yet home. So we talked with the pastor about ways that he was hoping to get his church involved with this house of farmworkers. He explained that in a rural church, there isn't a full calendar of activities available. The main event is Sunday morning worship.

As I listened to the pastor shared his experiences, I realized that even if this church is open to welcoming farmworkers to their Sunday morning services, farmworkers don't have Sundays off from work. Weekends are a luxury, not a civil right. Although it is a biblical command to take Sabbath, it is not yet a Department of Labor requirement. Realizing that it would be easier to add a church service than to demand a weekly Sabbath for farmworkers, I tried to imagine how a church might arrange a worship service conducive to the farmworker lifestyle. But I kept coming up with reasons for why it could never work: farmworkers are probably tired at the end of long twelve-hour workdays; farmworkers would probably feel uncomfortable entering churches that their bosses attend; farmworkers don't stay in communities for very long periods of time and therefore might not be interested in joining a church.

As I racked my brain for creative ideas about how to develop a farmworker-friendly church, the bus of farmworkers pulled up to the house across the street. The thirteen men invited us into their home, where everyone introduced himself or herself. We then read some scripture and shared in the Lord's Supper, feasting on bread and grape juice as a sign of God's love toward us and our fellowship with each other. Then, we continued feasting by breading apart slices of pizza and guzzling down cups of soda. Over bites of cheese and pepperoni, I chatted with one farmworker about his daily Scripture reading, with another farmworker about our shared love of horchata and the Pumas soccer team of the National Autonomous University of Mexico and another farmworker about his baby girl who he hasn't seen for six months.

On the bus ride home, I returned to lamenting about the logistical challenges of making church available to farmworkers. I tried to creatively rethink church and then I realized that perhaps the answer was right before my eyes – perhaps our Sunday evening gathering of pizza and soda and chatting was church.

In my worship class this semester, we learned that the four basic parts of Methodist worship include: the entrance, the proclamation and response, the thanksgiving/Holy Communion, and the sending forth. I think our visit to the farmworker house loosely followed this structure:

Entrance: Just as clergy persons greet congregants with words of welcome, the farmworkers welcomed the *Caminantes* group into their home with smiles and happy handshakes. We entered the house with recognition that this house was not our own just as church members enter the House of God with an attitude of reverence and respect.

Proclamation and Response: As the *Caminantes* introduced themselves, we proclaimed that we came to visit the farmworkers because as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are committed to caring for and being with the marginalized and oppressed in our community. We also read scripture that affirmed the Biblical rationale for our beliefs.

Thanksgiving/Holy Communion: Everyone confessed his or her individual and corporate sins to one another and then celebrated the Lord's Supper as a sign of reconciliation between God and us and between each other. We continued that meal of reconciliation with our pizza supper.

Sending Forth: The *Caminantes* group left the farmworkers' house with a renewed sense of mission. We feel called to transform the church into a place where all of God's children have an opportunity to join in fellowship with a body of believers.

Certainly this wasn't your typical worship service, yet it was more genuine and authentic than many megachurch services I've attended. I praise God for the opportunity to share in this farmworker church and I pray that communities like it continue to thrive and grow as the church remembers its commitment to live as faithful followers of Christ's radical message of hospitality.

By Lindsay Eierman. She is a candidate for a Master of Divinity graduating in May 2013. She is the co-coordinator of Manos Unidas - a Duke Divinity student group that celebrates ministry with Hispanic communities.

Originally published at: www.ncfan.org/blog/2012/10/18/farmworker-church.html

Reflection: Reaping with Shouts of Joy

Commentary on Psalm 126 (NRSV)

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

²Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”

³The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 126 may be read as a familiar Psalter poem that reflects the human spirit, while at the same time referencing its specific post-exilic prophetic message of deliverance from oppression. Many often think of the book of Psalms as beautiful personal poetry that is imbedded with experiences and feelings that can be transferred to that of a nation and all of humanity.

Psalm 126 fulfills this expectation of personal and universal feelings as it speaks of joy, surprise, sadness and thankfulness. Psalm 126 is also an acknowledgement of the role that the righteous God has played in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery with the promise of a greater future. This chapter acknowledges that God has delivered the people of Israel from their oppressors and because of this the people are comforted. The delivered community of exile has been restored to health—to a life free of oppression—and therefore is full of joy.

The fourth verse, which requests full deliverance of God’s people, as streams overflowing in the desert, transitions the psalm from celebration to a hope only known to those who have lived through oppression. “The opposite of joy is not sadness, but suffering. It is not the superficial kind of rejoicing that springs from unawareness or resignation, but the joy born of the conviction that unjust mistreatment and suffering will be overcome” (Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 115).

In the last two verses, we are reminded that, as in agriculture, the deliverance from oppression will not be easy or come quickly, but is promised. These verses remind one of the Beatitudes, which also promise justice to the poor in spirit, mourners, meek, hungry, merciful, pure, peacemakers and those who are persecuted. As Evelyn Mattern stated in *Blessed are You*:

“The hungry, the homeless, the impoverished, refugees, abused children, prisoners, addicts, elderly people discarded in nursing homes, victims of war: add them all together and you have a majority of the world’s population. This marginalized majority reflects many of the characteristics of the multitudes Jesus addressed [in the Sermon on the Mount].

Jesus does not promise an immediate, or eventual, paradise... those who have experienced the bliss of the beatitudes can affirm that it comes in the present, even in the midst of hardship and conflict” (Evelyn Mattern, *Blessed Are You: The Beatitudes and Our Survival*, 20-21).

This bittersweet celebration present in the Beatitudes and in Psalm 126 seems to be speaking of the joy that comes through political conflict and the struggle for social and economic justice in a way that harkens the voice of the prophets. While there is some relief from oppression, there is also work to be done and more hardships to suffer. But because the people who are “sowing seeds” of justice have been oppressed, their journey will be full of advent.

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Reflection on Psalm 126

One Sunday afternoon each fall at the crossroads of Highway 55 and Easy Street in Sampson County, North Carolina, thousands of campesinos, church members, families, student volunteers, and community members gather to celebrate the harvest and give thanks to farmworkers for bringing food to our tables. People enjoy traditional Mexican foods such as tamales, taquitos and horchata, as well as the American favorites, hot dogs and hamburgers. Children play games, couples dance to la musica, and families walk around gathering informational pamphlets from service agency representatives. The celebration ends with the soccer trophy being awarded to the champion team.

Around dusk, old school buses and vans caravan workers from the festival back to their reality—overcrowded trailers and substandard farm houses with broken windows and sagging roofs; poverty wages where they are paid by the piece; 12-hour work days; and no overtime, holidays, sick days, workers’ compensation, health insurance, vacation or retirement. The reality of farmworkers is inhuman. Most universally acknowledged standards of human rights, such as access to just and favorable conditions of work, fair wages, a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of one’s family, and decent housing and medical care, are denied to farm workers. Unfortunately, the American Dream that many exiled Latin American farmworkers seek in the U.S. becomes a nightmare of discrimination and exploitation. Below is an excerpt from an interview with a farmworker in North Carolina who speaks to the disappointment often faced by immigrants who come to the U.S. searching for the American Dream.

Reflection: Reaping with Shouts of Joy (continued)

One comes looking to make money. And this is a lie because one comes to suffer worse than in his own land...One leaves the family to suffer to come make money here in the United States and it is not true, how one imagines it will be... us immigrants, we are blamed for everything...Truthfully poverty exists [in Mexico], why should we tell you otherwise? Because if there were no poverty, we would not have to come. (Source: Libby Manny, Alejandra Okie, Melinda Wiggins, eds. "Interview with Miguel by Luis Mendoza." *Fields Without Borders/Campos Sin Fronteras: An Anthology of Documentary Writing and Photography by Student Action with Farmworkers' Interns*, SAF: Durham, 1998).

During the annual Farmworker Festival, there seems to be a communion of peoples without the usual borders erected by language, class, race, ethnicity or citizenship. For one day each year, there is mutual respect, appreciation, and thanksgiving for the primarily undocumented and working class Spanish-speakers who harvest our fruits and vegetables. The festival provides physical nourishment to the body accompanied by a rejoicing of the spirit. It is through these common experiences of sharing a meal, celebration, learning, and talking that we begin to encounter community. Unfortunately, this day doesn't come too often and rarely translates to our everyday being. The daily separation that farmworkers face from the larger "native" community leads to many health-related illnesses such as depression and alcoholism, and it further isolates this already exiled community. The effect on the "native" North Carolina community can be one of spiritual death, as lack of communion with those who are oppressed can leave one with no hope. This segregation of peoples is a symptom that the community as a whole is not well.

As many liberation theologians point out, those who are oppressed are the most aware of the causes of their oppression and poised to seek justice. Because of their marginalization, farmworkers advocate and organize for freedom from slavery, oppression and death. The liberation that farmworkers seek is not only for corporal life, but is spiritual freedom as well. Certainly physical death is one form of oppression that farm workers face. Two workers died in the fields of North Carolina in 2005 from heat stroke, hundreds of Latin Americans die annually crossing the U.S./ Mexico border, and hundreds of thousands of farm laborers are poisoned with potentially deadly pesticides each year. Farmworkers are also seeking a spiritual community. "This spirituality gives rise to new songs to the Lord, songs filled with an authentic joy because it is spirituality that is nourished by the hope of a people familiar with the suffering caused by poverty and contempt" (Gutierrez, 19).

In 2004, North Carolina farmworkers won a contract with the NC Growers' Association and Mt. Olive Pickle Co. ending the boycott of Mt. Olive pickles and gaining respect in the workplace for over 8,500 farm workers. With this victory, there was much celebration among farm workers and advocates. Now there is the acknowledgement that there are over one hundred thousand additional farmworkers

who need protections, wage increases, and benefits. This need for full deliverance from oppression is reminiscent of a speech made by Frederick Douglass at a Fourth of July Celebration in 1852 when he reminded the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of liberty's unfinished business. Though referring to slavery, his challenge of the need for awareness, action, and hope is relevant today. He implies that since the church did not stand against slavery, then it

"...regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and not a vital principle, requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will towards man. It esteems sacrifice above mercy; psalm-singing above right doing; solemn meetings above practical righteousness. A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to the houseless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and who enjoin obedience to a law forbidding these acts of mercy, is a curse, not a blessing" (Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" 05 July 1852).

While it is through oppression that marginalized communities are blessed and thus promised liberation, it is through solidarity with farmworkers and other marginalized peoples that many of us can participate in the collective journey toward justice. Without communion with farmworkers, who nourish us physically and spiritually, we are not able to challenge the individualism, discrimination, and oppression that support injustice based on one's documentation status, country of origin, color of skin, language spoken, or money earned. As long as farm laborers continue to live in exile away from their families, earn poverty wages, and work and live in life-threatening conditions, liberty has unfinished business. It is only through a communal journey of hardship and conflict that farmworkers and advocates can restore the full community to health—to a life free of oppression—and therefore be full of joy.

By Melinda Wiggins, Executive Director, Student Action with Farmworkers.

Originally published at: www.ncchurches.org/lectionary/year-b/justice-for-farmworkers-thanksgiving

Reflection: Let the Oppressed Go Free

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:14-15 (NRSV)

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

Ezekiel 22:29 (NRSV)

The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress.

Isaiah 58:6-9 (NRSV)

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and [the LORD] will say, Here I am.

Social Justice Reflection

In this season of Lent, we are challenged once again to hear the voice of the Lord calling us to repentance and holy living. This calling reverberates from our individual lives to the life of our community. From cover to cover, the Bible is clear that how we treat the vulnerable among us is an indicator of our relationship with God.

For many of us in the United States, the oppression of “poor and needy laborers” happens behind the scenes, out of sight and out of mind. It happens every time an unethical employer cheats on the paychecks, knowing that he can get away with it. It happens every time workers are denied their human dignity on the job, whether they are refused the chance to use the bathroom or get help for an injury.

Today, farmworkers remain one of the most vulnerable populations in society. Eighty five percent of our fruits and vegetables are picked by hand, yet nationally, farmworkers’ average annual income is \$11,000; for a family it is approximately \$16,000. Farmworkers on the East Coast earn about 35% less than the national average. In addition, farmworkers are paid nearly 50% less per week than other wage and salary workers. The percent of farmworker families living in poverty is nearly double that of other working families in the US.

Most farmworkers are exempt from minimum wage laws, and all are exempt from overtime provisions, despite long workdays during peak harvest.

Despite pervasive poverty, less than one percent of farmworkers collect general assistance welfare nationwide. Only 10% of farmworkers report having health insurance through an employer health plan. Fewer than four out of 10 workers interviewed said that they would receive unemployment benefits if out of work. Finally, nearly five out of 10 farmworker households in North Carolina reported not being able to afford enough food to feed their families.

Going back to the legal institution of slavery, there is a deeply ingrained societal norm that farmworkers should be treated differently than other workers and don’t deserve better conditions. This is reflected today in the belief that if people just work hard enough, they will be able to get better jobs. It can also be seen in attitudes by some growers, policymakers, and others who believe that the status quo is acceptable.

What does it say about our society – and our relationship with God – that those who pick our food don’t have enough to eat themselves? In Deuteronomy, God commanded that protections be put in place for those who were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. These protections applied both to native Israelites and also to foreigners working the land. In the prophetic texts from Isaiah and Ezekiel, it’s clear that the people did not listen to God’s command, and they are subject to judgment because of their disobedience.

How can we respond to the injustices of our time? Isaiah makes it clear that acts of religious piety by themselves are not enough; we are called to break the bonds of injustice, to share our bread, to let the oppressed go free. Only then will the light of the people of God shine for all to see. As we turn and repent this Lenten season, let us join the movement for justice for farmworkers and all those who stand at the margins. As César Chávez said: “What do we want the church to do? We ask for its presence with us, as Christ among us. We ask the church to sacrifice with the people for social change, for justice, and for love of brother and sister. We don’t ask for words, we ask for deeds. We don’t ask for paternalism. We ask for servanthood.”

By Chris Liu-Beers, Program Associate, NC Council of Churches

Originally published at: www.ncchurches.org/lent



Resources on Faith and Farmworkers

There is a wide variety of resources available to aid you and your congregation in exploring how your faith relates to your relationship with farmworkers. For links to these recommended resources, visit www.ncfarmworkers.org/resources.

Farmworker Factsheets

These two-page factsheets provide up-to-date statistics, graphs, and dates about current farmworker demographics, economic contributions, immigration-related issues, and health concerns. Free hard copies are available in English and Spanish.

- Facts about North Carolina Farmworkers
- Farmworkers' Vital Contribution to North Carolina's Economy
- Farmworkers and Immigration
- North Carolina Farmworker Health Facts
- United States Farmworker Factsheet

Curricula for Group Study

- *Hands of Harvest, Hearts of Justice: North Carolina farmworker issues in a biblical context—a curriculum for faith communities*
- *Becoming the Church Together: Immigration, the Bible, and our New Neighbors*
- *For You Were Once a Stranger: Immigration in the U.S. through the Lens of Faith*

Speakers

If you would be interested in having someone come to speak to your congregation, please fill out the speaker request form on the Student Action with Farmworkers' website (available at <http://www.saf-unite.org/content/request-speaker>).

Short Films and Documentary Work

"Harvest of Dignity" (2011) by Minnow Media in collaboration with the Farmworker Advocacy Network

Revisiting Edward R. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame" (1960) a half century later, "Harvest of Dignity" focuses on the lives and work of farmworkers in North Carolina, providing an in-depth portrait of the people who harvest our food today. Study guide available online.

"Harvest of Shame" (1960) by Edward R. Murrow and CBS News

"Harvest of Shame" was an influential television documentary presented on CBS by broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow that showed the US public the plight of migrant agricultural workers along the East Coast.

"Our Forgotten Neighbors" (2011) by the Farmworker Advocacy Network and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

"Our Forgotten Neighbors" describes the major issues that farmworkers face in North Carolina and the work of the Farmworker Advocacy Network with a focus on child labor in the fields and how faith communities are involved with farmworker advocacy.

Student Action with Farmworkers' Documentary Projects

Student Action with Farmworkers has made selections from their student oral history and photography projects available online. Project themes include farmworkers' memories of home, education, and work.

The Costs & Joys of Discipleship: Forty Years of the National Farm Worker Ministry (2011)

To celebrate its 40th anniversary, the National Farm Worker Ministry produced a short documentary project from interviews with people of faith who have been involved with the farmworker movement over the last several decades. Discussion guide available online.

"When I first got to the United States I didn't know how to do the work; it seemed difficult. But as time passed I began to pick it up better and better and now thank God I understand a little of what it is to work in the fields...We have to work it to earn a little money because here if you don't work you don't eat."

SC Farmworker

Books and Other Publications

Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible (2008) by M. Daniel Carroll R.

Christians at the Border provides biblical and ethical guidance for readers who are looking for a Christian perspective on immigration. As both Guatemalan and American, the author has immersed himself in this issue and is uniquely qualified to write about it. Drawing on key biblical ideas, he speaks to both the immigrant culture and the host culture, arguing that both sides have much to learn about the debate.

Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal (2001) by Eric Schlosser

Fast Food Nation tells the story of the US and the world's infatuation with fast food, from its origins in 1950s southern California to the global triumph of a handful of burger and fried chicken chains. Schlosser visits the labs where scientists re-create the smell and taste of everything—from cooked meat to fresh strawberries; talks to the workers with some of the worst safety records in the world; explains exactly where the meat comes from and just why the fries taste so good; and looks at the way the fast food industry is transforming not only our diet but our landscape, economy, workforce, and culture.

Nuestras Historias, Nuestros Sueños/Our Stories, Our Dreams (2008) by Student Action with Farmworkers and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

Nuestras Historias, Nuestros Sueños/Our Stories, Our Dreams uses the documentary arts to amplify the voices of Latino migrant youth and their families about their hopes and dreams for the future. The bilingual publication is complemented by a traveling exhibit. Contact SAF to host the exhibit or receive a copy of the publication.

Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail (2002) by Deborah Barndt

Tangled Routes follows a corporate tomato from a Mexican field through the US to a Canadian table, examining in its wake the dynamic relationship between production and consumption, work and technology, health and environment, bio-diversity and cultural diversity.

The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy (2002) edited by Charles D. Thompson, Jr. & Melinda F. Wiggins

The Human Cost of Food addresses major factors that affect farmworkers' lives while offering practical strategies for action on farmworker issues. Focusing on workers in the Southeast United States, a previously understudied region, they cover a range of issues, from labor organizing, to the rise of agribusiness, to current health, educational, and legal challenges faced by farmworkers. Contact SAF to order a copy.

The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina: New Roots in the Old North State (2010) by Hannah Gill

The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina offers North Carolinians from all walks of life a better understanding of their Latino neighbors, bringing light

instead of heat to local and national debates on immigration. Exploring the larger social forces behind demographic shifts, Gill shows both how North Carolina communities are facing the challenges and opportunities presented by these changes and how migrants experience the economic and social realities of their new lives.

The Ministry of the Dispossessed: Learning from the Farm Worker Movement (1987) by Patricia Hoffman

The Ministry of the Dispossessed provides a history of and justification for faith community involvement with the farmworker movement in the 1970s and the formation of the National Farm Worker Ministry.



“So there is the quote that says, man proposes and God disposes. So if one, if you want to reach your goal, don't give up easily. Stay at it and move forward, forward, forward. If I want to save 200 or 500 dollars in a week, and I know I can make that much in a week with the amount of work they're giving me, I can do it. I believe you can achieve anything by setting your goal and saying you can do it. If you say it, you can do it, God willing.”

North Carolina Farmworker

Get Involved & Learn More!

National Farm Worker Ministry: www.nfwm.org

NC Council of Churches: www.nccouncilofchurches.org

NC Farmworker Institute: www.ncfarmworkers.org

Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF): www.saf-unite.org



Connecting Faith Communities and Farmworkers

There are many ways that congregations can get involved in the lives of farmworkers. Some models for getting started are outlined below. Visit www.ncfarmworkers.org/resources for more information on each model.

Ministry with farmworkers remains controversial today because:

- Many (but not all) farmworkers are undocumented immigrants. Discussions about labor conditions or wages often quickly become discussions about immigration.
- Many growers are facing shrinking profits, with some families losing their farms to development, foreclosure, or other economic factors. In this context, there is much resistance to the idea that farmworkers should earn higher wages or have more rights on the job.
- Going back to the legal institution of slavery in the 1800s, there is a deeply ingrained societal norm that farmworkers should be treated differently than other workers and don't deserve better conditions. This is reflected today in the belief that if people just work hard enough, they will be able to get better jobs. It can also be seen in attitudes by some growers, policy-makers, and others who believe that the status quo is acceptable.

Despite or perhaps even because of these challenges, we as Christians should be particularly interested in working to create a society that adequately values farmworker contributions and welcomes immigrant workers into our communities.

Develop a Process

As you consider how to introduce farmworker issues into your congregational context, it can be helpful to outline the whole process you hope to go through with your congregation before you begin. Please check out the website above for more information about how to approach controversial issues in your congregations.

Prepare

- Pray.
- Clarify your goals.
- Articulate your own feelings and opinions on this topic.
- Meet with farmworkers and people who work with farmworkers.
- Study the issues. Use our resource guide to get started.
- Think carefully about the people in your congregation. Meet with those that have a direct connection to farmworkers (e.g., growers or those that grew up working in the fields). Are there some who would likely be supportive? Are there others who might not be?
- Decide on a program—which model will your congregation utilize?

Implement

- Do everything you can to create a safe space for everyone.

- Model respectful dialogue.
- Publicize the program.
- Be patient. This is difficult work.
- Use the resources of your denomination and local organizations.

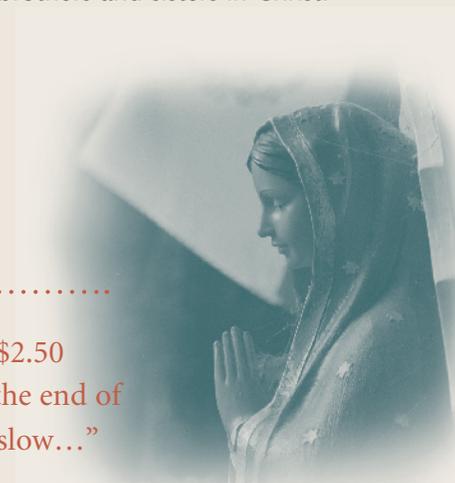
Follow-Up

- Remember that this is a process. You will probably encounter new and different questions as you go.
- Develop appropriate next steps. This could be further study, a service opportunity, an outreach project, a delegation with farmworkers, or supporting an advocacy campaign.
- Summarize and celebrate your conversations. Be honest about areas of disagreement and highlight blessings discovered along the way.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is helping a congregation begin to see farmworkers as created in God's image and thus full members of our community. In theological terms, we might use the language of "strangers no longer" and "brothers and sisters in Christ."

“On the first day of picking okra I barely did four boxes. They were paying me \$2.50 per box, which would total \$10. I spent \$5 on lunch, and I was left with \$5. By the end of the day I was left with nothing. All the money was gone. Because the work was slow...”

South Carolina Farmworker



Explore Common Misunderstandings

We've found that most of the controversial conversations about farmworkers are based on myths or misunderstandings. Many of these myths can fracture communities and pit one group against another. You may want to explore these in your congregational discussions as a way of moving members to a better understanding of our farmworker neighbors.

Faith and Politics

- **Myth:** Christianity is about the spiritual, not the political. We shouldn't talk about wages, racism, immigration, or other political issues in church.
- **Fact:** Jesus was a very political figure in his time, and at least some in the Church have always followed his lead in ministering with those who society attempts to marginalize. Christians should speak up and get involved when it comes to issues that are central to biblical teaching, like caring for the poor and welcoming the stranger.

Immigration Status

- **Myth:** Undocumented farmworkers could immigrate to the US legally if they wanted.
- **Fact:** Under our current immigration system, there is no path available for the majority of poor farmworkers to apply for legal residency or work status. A very small percentage (less than 10%) of NC growers use the guestworker (H2A) temporary work visa program, but there are no visas for "unskilled," "essential" workers who fill year-round jobs. Many undocumented immigrants would rather have a legal status in the US, but lack a way to gain that documentation.
- **Myth:** If farmworkers are undocumented, then they do not have any rights.
- **Fact:** All workers, regardless of immigration status, have basic rights on the job. These rights should be protected if for no other

reason than when they are undermined it offers a competitive economic advantage to employers who purposefully hire a vulnerable workforce over those growers that follow the law. Everyone deserves dignity on the job, no matter their occupation or country of origin.

Economic Factors

- **Myth:** Immigrant farmworkers take jobs from US workers and get free housing and benefits.
- **Fact:** The small percentage of growers who use the guestworker (H2A) program are required to pay workers above minimum wage and provide free temporary housing. The majority of farmworkers work more than full-time for below-poverty wages and no benefits, and are not protected by health and safety laws protecting all other workers in the US. Many farmworkers that pick our fresh fruits and vegetables cannot afford to feed their own families.

National Origin

- **Myth:** Conditions here are better than in farmworkers' home countries. They shouldn't complain.
- **Fact:** Many immigrant farmworkers have better housing, extended community and family, and were once farm owners in their country of origin. However, because of lack of jobs and opportunity, economic necessity forces some people to migrate in search of work. It's a tremendous sacrifice to leave one's family, live isolated from others, and go years without seeing your children in order to provide for them.

Getting Started

Here are some concrete ideas for how to help your congregation get involved with farmworkers:

- Sponsor a congregational meal that highlights farmworkers' contributions to our food system.
- Invite small groups to participate in a Bible study focused on farmworkers.
- Host a knowledgeable speaker who works with farmworkers or invite farmworkers themselves to share their first-hand experiences.
- Participate in a service project such as a bilingual book drive or long-sleeve shirt drive to benefit farmworkers and their families.
- Take up donations to support the NC Migrant Emergency Fund or an organization supporting farmworkers in your area.
- Include farmworkers in pastoral prayers and other parts of the worship service.
- Preach a sermon about farmworkers.



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NC Farmworker Institute: www.ncfarmworkers.org

Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF): www.saf-unite.org