

Buckner Coe 1982–1985

After a long career as a UCC parish minister, I became a member of the staff of the National Farm Worker Ministry in November of 1982 and was assigned to the Los Angeles office on West Olympic. When that office was closed and much of the work done there transferred to Oakland, I remained in Los Angeles until May of 1985 when I retired, using space made available first by the USC Religious Center and then by the Morningside UCC Church in Inglewood.

My duties involved organizing events and performing other tasks for Cesar and the UFW and Baldemar Velasquez and FLOC in Los Angeles. One memorable series of events revolved around an “Hispanics Say No” campaign on the part of Cesar and the UFW in connection with certain California ballot propositions in the fall of 1984. All four propositions were defeated, in no small part because of Cesar’s and the UFW’s efforts.

Another personally memorable event occurred on the occasion of a weekend of picketing Ralph’s grocery stores in Los Angeles by a group of farmworkers from Salinas. I was in charge of logistics: food, lodging, etc. Thanks to Bill Ruth, a Lutheran pastor in Baldwin Park, some 40 farmworkers were housed in his church. Around 4 in the morning, the phone at the church rang. I answered it. A voice said, “Cesar?” No, I said, he is not here right now, may I help you? The voice then said, “This is the chief of police of Baldwin Park. You are surrounded!” What?! said I. The voice said there were reports of farmworkers from the church making trouble at a nearby convenience store. Well, I replied, that cannot be true; they are all here sleeping in the church. Well now, the voice said, if you do not want trouble, you come to the front door of the church, turn on the outside lights, open the door, put your hands on your head and come out. I proceeded to do just that, and sure enough found my self confronted by six or seven of Baldwin Park’s finest, guns pointed directly at me. I managed to persuade them that we were harmless, and the police left. When I told Bill Ruth about this the next day, he was very put out. He proceeded to the police station where he read the riot act to the chief.

It was a great experience working with the ministry, the UFW, and FLOC. I have a lot of people to thank for the opportunity: my son Andy, who worked for the UFW in the early 1970s and who introduced me to Fred Eyster, who hired me; my colleagues in the UFW office on West Olympic, who showed me how things were done; Chris and Pudge Hartmire, who befriended me and taught me on my trips to La Paz; and most of all, the farmworkers and Cesar and Dolores and their colleagues who found ways to advance the cause in the most adverse of circumstances. Cesar especially was a revelation to me. I remember attending a meeting in his office at La Paz one morning and seeing on his desk a volume of Thomas Merton’s writings. How many people in this world have the works of Thomas Merton at hand while engaged in the hard business of organizing anything, not to speak of the difficulties involved in organizing farmworkers?