

Farm Worker-Ministers – A Proposal to the Churches from
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“Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice; correct oppression;...” Isaiah 1:14-17

Introduction

The injustice that surrounds the life of seasonal farm worker families is a deep cancer which penetrates to all levels of our corporate life. Farmers, teachers, workers – all of us are touched by a disease that afflicts the spiritual well being of persons as well as the unity and strength of the community. A new measure of health in agricultural communities requires that this injustice be faced squarely.

Christians, identified in Christ with the suffering of our fellows, are under biblical injunction to establish justice wherever men are oppressed. Called to this task, the churches in California working through the Migrant Ministry have been active in farm labor communities for two decades. During that time, our approach to serving farm workers has changed more than once. With the initiation of community development efforts in Dos Palos, Tulare County and elsewhere, it has become apparent that our best intentions for service fall short when we shy away from the basic socio-economic problem of unorganized seasonal farm workers; that basic problem is the economic and political powerlessness of the workers and the inadequate and unjust income that results from that powerlessness.

Parallel to this observation is the realization that we in the mainline Protestant denominations represent the established power order. From the farm workers' point of view we are among those who deal callously with him and his family. Injustice and alienation define our relationship to seasonal farm workers. Honesty requires that we deal first with this basic element in our relationship to the farm worker community. Effective proclamation of the Gospel in this situation means identification with the farm worker in his struggle for dignity and purpose.

The proposal which follows may offer a way for all of us to work together to bridge the gap that separates us from low income seasonal farm workers. The proposal is aimed at effective identification with seasonal farm workers and at providing relevant organizational services to a people in need.

Community Development Experience to Date

The Farm Worker-Minister Proposal is based in part upon experimental community development work that the denominations have been carrying on in conjunction with the California Migrant Ministry. That effort has been aimed at organizing seasonal farm workers and their low income neighbors into self-help groups which will work toward goals the people establish. The following is a brief summary of these projects:

1. Dos Palos (Disciples of Christ): The project was begun in 1959 and is continuing although many programs are now being carried on under the auspices the Economic Opportunity Act. The staff consists of a community worker. The Director of the California Migrant Ministry is a consultant. There is a close working relationship with the local Disciples congregation. The program included the following: building a community center; organizing the Negro fringe area to work on job discrimination, a water system, police harassment, recreation, child care, etc.; casework. Dialogue with the established community is maintained through the Disciples congregation.
2. South Bakersfield (United church of Christ): The project began in 1957 and is still in operation. The staff includes the director of Friendship House and a Brethren volunteer. The Director of the California Migrant Ministry is a consultant. The Board of Directors is composed of Conference appointees. The program includes the following: building a community center; providing a varied program for children and youth; developing an indigenous adult community council responsible with staff to plan programs for the center; casework. Dialogue with the established community affected through Board members and the denomination.
3. Goshen (United Church of Christ): The project was begun in 1962 and is still in operation. The staff consists of a community worker. The Director of the California Migrant Ministry is staff supervisor. The Board of Directors is composed of local Goshen citizens. The program includes: organizing local adult leadership to be responsible for building a community center; casework. Dialogue with the established community is carried on through the Kings-Tulare Migrant Ministry and the denomination.
4. Tulare County (United Church of Christ and the Migrant Ministry): The project was begun in 1964 and is still in operation. The staff consists of three (3) community organizers. Supervision is provided by the Director of the California Migrant Ministry. The program includes: organizing seasonal farm workers into a self-help action group which will be controlled by the members and will work on their goals e.g., more low income housing, improved County Hospital, legal wages in sugar beets, fair rents in public housing, improved wages and working conditions on the job; casework; gas and tire co-op; credit union and death benefit insurance.

Dialogue with the established community through the KTMM* and the denominations.

*Kings-Tulare Migrant Ministry

Out of this series of efforts several conclusions can be drawn:

1. Seasonal farm workers and their low-income neighbors can be organized for self-help action. The effort requires at least the following:
 - a. a catalyst (organizer) who can gain the people's confidence;
 - b. issues which the people care deeply about (many of the issues will be controversial);
 - c. a democratic structure that is controlled by the people being served.
2. Organized farm workers can exert influence, challenge established injustices and improve conditions on and off the job. The whole community is served as the previously disenfranchised people join with dignity and strength in defining the shape of community life.
3. Social change is accompanied by "people change". Leaders emerge and are trained. Human needs are served in a way that strengthens the sense of dignity of the participants. People who are not used to participating in community life learn the tools of democracy in an organization of their own.
4. Middle class staff people must go through a period of testing before their trustworthiness is established. The chasm between the established communities of our agricultural valleys and the farm worker communities is deep. The staff person is at first an alien in a hostile land. His income, education and work experience slow down the necessary process of identification.
5. Emerging organizations may be targeted on neighborhood needs (water, recreation, streets, open housing, etc.) or on labor issues (wages, working conditions, foreign labor, etc.) or on both.
6. So long as they have confidence in staff, supporting groups must be willing to let the staff be responsive to those goals and tactics decided on by the low-income people. In some cases, these goals and tactics will be resented by community leaders, employers and others.

The Worker-Priest Idea

Churchmen in many times and places have grappled with the problem of witnessing to the world of the workingman from an institutional base which is primarily managerial and professional in orientation. In our country there have been industrial chaplains and industrial missions along side other experiments.

In France between 1947 and 1954, there was a bold attempt by a number of Catholic clergymen to work from the “inside” as worker-priests. They sought to be at the mercy of the working class men and women who were, by and large, outside the Church. Priests took jobs in factories and on public works projects. Many of them joined labor unions and some were active as volunteer officers and organizers.

In the summer of 1963, the Rev. Richard Sample of the Migrant Ministry worked in the fields with a youth crew in west Fresno County. He learned a good deal and established a deeper relationship with the boys, their families, and many other farm workers in the community he has served for five (5) years.

Farm Worker-Ministers in California

It is proposed to establish a new form of ministry among farm workers drawing on community development experience to date in California and on the worker-priest idea. Young clergymen and theologically articulate laymen will be recruited to serve as “worker-ministers”. In most cases, these men will be single or married without children. They will be expected to live in rural fringe neighborhoods and to work as farm laborers with projected farm labor earnings of \$1,500 per year. A supporting denomination will provide an additional \$2,000 per man plus hospitalization and pension. On the one hand, the total income will not be large enough to cut the worker-minister off from his fellow workers; on the other hand, the denominational subsidy will free him enough to engage in organizational activities that might take any one of several forms indicated above. The worker-minister could also be described as a worker-organizer with the recognition that organizational services are a basic form of helpfulness (servant-hood in a relevant form).

The worker-minister will participate as a layman in the life of a local congregation. He can be vital link between the life of the Church (local and regional) and the life situation of his fellow workers. He will share his faith primarily by his actions but also in other ways that seem natural.

Each worker-minister will have a partner who will be on the same financial footing. The co-worker will be recruited from among farm workers. His inbred sense of the outcast and lifelong identity with and understanding of the farm workers’ situation will be a necessary complement to the worker-minister’s education-oriented skills. The two men will share the organizational responsibilities. It would be easy to compile a list of fifteen farm workers who might function in this way. Some of them are active churchmen; some are not.

To summarize, two persons make up a worker-minister team. One is a farm worker who will be partially supported to do some organizational work; the second is a theologically trained community worker who will become a farm worker. Both men will engage in organizing activities as opportunity arises either in developing new organizations or in relating to existing organizations. Both men (except where the farm worker member is a non-churchman) would seek to participate in the life of the Christian community.

The organizational services are viewed as catalysts. Any neighborhood or labor organizations that are developed or assisted by the worker-minister teams should become independent and self-supporting. In most cases, worker-minister teams will be asked to commit two (2) years to the community where they live and work.

Finance and Administration

It is proposed to put four to six teams in the field during 1966. Each team will cost \$4,000 plus hospitalization and pension. Individual denominations will be approached for support of one or more teams.

Supervision and coordination will be the responsibility of the California Migrant Ministry as the agency of all the denominations working together. It is assumed that most team members will need to receive intensive field training with one of the existing community development projects.

In addition to having close supervision and regular opportunities to reflect together on their experience, the worker-minister teams will be expected to join supervising staff in continuing evaluation of the impact of their efforts.

Interpretation

The justice-for-farm-workers issue is emerging into the light of day. In many ways it parallels the racial justice issue in our land. Many growers are confused and angered by the Church's activity in this labor arena. These men are highly visible in the life of the denominations and their protests are being felt.

The worker-minister proposal asks the Church to continue and deepen its commitment to the needs of farm workers; it is based on the assumption that justice for farm workers and for the whole agricultural community requires a rebalancing of the power forces in agricultural communities. There seems to be no way to accomplish this except by helping farm workers act effectively in organizations of their own.

Experience to date indicates that some churchmen and community leaders will strongly resist church-sponsored efforts to help farm workers organize for self-help action. Other churchmen will be supportive if they are informed. The California Migrant Ministry with adequate support from the denominations could organize and implement a strong interpretation program aimed at pastors, denominational staff people and key laymen.

Conclusion

The basic thrust of this proposal should be clear. It is not intended to be a way of initiating new churches or as a new form of preaching mission. The primary purpose of

the Farm Worker-Minister program is to provide effective assistance to seasonal farm workers who need and want to be organized for their own well being. The proposal offers a practical way for our churches to face the reality of community life and to stand with low-income farm workers in their struggle for dignity and justice.

It is certain that a measure of justice for farm workers will improve the health of the whole agricultural community. It is possible that out of this effort to be with an alienated people, the Church will discover new forms for corporate Christian life in low-income communities.

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