

The Churches and the Organization of Farm Workers
Director's Report to Commission on the California Migrant Ministry (CMM)
September 15-16, 1965 – Fresno, California

Introduction

It appears to me that we are at a crossroads point in the relationship of our churches to seasonal farm workers. The State and National Councils of Churches are under fire for their positions on farm labor issues. The Migrant Ministry (MM) is being severely criticized for organizational activities in Tulare and Fresno Counties. The "Worker-Minister" paper proposes another step toward bridging the deep chasm that separates our people from seasonal farm workers. Shall we seriously recommend this step to the denominations?

In order to deal with that question or need to face our recent past and the issues it raises. I will try to summarize our activity in Tulare County, draw conclusions from it and pose some of the key questions that are before us.

History of Tulare County Community Development (CD) Project

In Tulare County there are three (3) CD workers under the supervision of the Director of the CMM. Dave Havens and Gil Padilla are paid by the CMM (Gil through a Rosenberg grant to CMM), and Jim Drake by the N. Calif. Conference of the UCC (with assistance from the national Board for Homeland Ministries). In supervising these men, I am responsible, administratively, to the Executive of the California Church Council on the one hand and to the Associate Conference minister of the N. Conference of the UCC on the other. Basic policy guidance is the responsibility of the California Church Council (on recommendation from this Commission) and the Board of Directors of the UCC Conference (on recommendation from their Commission on Church and Community).

The first goal of the project is to help seasonal farm workers articulate their needs, unite in an organization of their own and work together on goals they establish, using methods they determine. Supporting groups (including local churches through KTMM) understand that Drake, Havens and Padilla are to be primarily responsive to the aspirations of the low income farm workers.

The second goal of the project is mission education in local congregations that are close to this new farm labor ferment. I am responsible to mobilize the sympathetic pastors and laymen of the KTMM to do this job.

Some of the key events are as follows:

- (1) Spring of 1964: Havens assigned to work with low income people and established churches in Porterville area of Tulare County. Middle class people were ready to

- organize and to engage in creative activity. Havens had too little time to produce significant self-help activity among the low income people.
- (2) September 1964: Drake shifted by UCC from Goshen to full-time CD effort in Tulare County (Phil Farnham replaced Drake in Goshen).
 - (3) October 16, 1964: ETMM, which raises part of Havens' salary voted at annual meeting to "designate the CD Pilot Project its major program for the next two years, and release (Havens) to be full-time field staff in that project." Havens now joined Drake in full-time work with low income people.
 - (4) September 1964-February 1965: Farm Worker's Organization of Tulare County (FWO) developed, with gas, oil and tire co-op, monthly dues, service office, membership of approximately 90 families. Action programs included: organized protest against foreign labor importation; Christmas party attended by 250 men, women and children; development of a camp council in Woodville labor camp to work on sanitation, maintenance and police protection; registration of 1,000 voters; mass meeting with Governor Brown on farm labor issues; formation of Mexican-American group to work on apparent legal negligence; and teacher brutality in case of a school fight.
 - (5) January 1965: As result of growing reaction to FWO and after hearing report of a Study Committee, the First Congregational Church of Porterville voted 91-39 to withdraw support of CD project. They had previously agreed to provide \$3,300 toward UCC support of Jim Drake.
 - (6) February 15, 1965: Gil Padilla hired, using funds provided by Rosenberg Foundation.
 - (7) March 25, 1965: Hearing on Sugar Beet complaints; wages of \$.16 to .85 per hr. paid while minimum was \$1.15 per hr.; testimony before Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz.
 - (8) April 1965: FWO (Farm Workers Organization) members voted to affiliate (Farm Workers Association) of Delano. Benefits gained: credit union, death benefit insurance policy, tie-in to on-going self-supporting, statewide group.
 - (9) May 3-6, 1965: FWA engages in strike at Mont Arbor Nurseries in McFarland, Kern County. Piece rates constant for 15 years until drop in 1965; most active rose worker fired and black-listed. FWA asked CMM for staff assistance. Jim Drake was assigned for the duration of strike. Wages raised but no recognition or bargaining.
 - (10) June to present, 1965: Rents raised in metal shelters of Woodville and Linnell labor camps. Tenants rebelled. MM-UCC workers provided staff assistance. Shelters now condemned as "unfit for human habitation." Rent issue still not resolved.
 - (11) August 1965: 67 workers walked off Martin Ranch (pre-harvest grapes). Issues: \$1.40 instead of \$1.25; no toilets; one drinking cup for all workers; slowest man fired each day; foreman peeping at women as they go to bathroom in the fields. Most of the workers live in Woodville Labor Camp. They asked MM-UCC staff to represent them. Conditions improved for strikebreakers but no recognition or bargaining.
 - (12) June-September 1965: Sporadic conversations with local churchmen replaced by beginning a regular seminar with key clergymen. KTMM re-evaluating role; will probably sponsor expanded seminar to include farm workers and others in community who are willing to relate to the emerging farm workers organization.

- (13) March-September 1965: Growing restiveness on the part of local churches; four (4) congregations have now established study committees to evaluate MM activity and make recommendations on future support (presently they contribute a total of approximately \$1,300 per year).
- (14) March-September 1965: Growing reaction in UCC circles; Conference Board voted 6-3 in July to pick-up that part of Drakes salary that local church in Porterville dropped. September Conference Board meeting (September 14) devoted afternoon to evaluation of Tulare County Project. Result...?
- (15) September-December 1965 (and perhaps beyond): FWA membership drive throughout Tulare County to build stronger base with expectation of self-support by fall of 1966.

Some Obvious Result...In Abbreviation Form

- (1) Development of an organization that farm workers trust.
- (2) Some victories on issues and observed dependability of staff-enough, so that many more farm workers are now coming forward with protests and ideas for change.
- (3) Establishment of fringe benefits, planned and controlled by the members; co-op, life insurance, credit union and service office.
- (4) Emergence of new leaders in low-income community.
- (5) New feeling for the farm worker's situation on the part of a limited number of churchmen and community leaders. (This is especially true in regard to housing conditions in public labor camps)
- (6) Widespread negative reaction to the effort to organize farm workers, some of it directed at performance, personality and political ideology of CD workers.
- (7) New support for the farm workers cause from individuals and groups at the state and national level (church, student and civil rights groups).

Tentative Conclusions

- (1) Seasonal farm workers (migrant and settled) can be organized for self-help action if staff catalysts are willing to listen completely and allow an organization to develop around the most deeply felt needs and resentments of the people.
- (2) Organized farm workers can exert influence, challenge established injustices and improve conditions on and off the job.
- (3) Church bodies at the state and national level are willing to lend assistance to farm workers who want to organize for self-help action.
- (4) Local congregations in agricultural valleys are, in the main, unable or unwilling to support such self-help action.
- (5) Individual churchmen and others in the established rural communities are willing to support such action, even when there is risk involved.
- (6) Organized farm workers can ask for services they need (that others may want to impose on them) and can enter into equal purposeful dialogue with concerned churchmen and others.

- (7) If we are serious about “mission education” in local congregations, more independent staff time (someone other than CD workers) must be assigned to this task. The results noted in four and five might have been changed somewhat by additional staff time on mission education.

Issues to be Dealt With

- (1) Is action on justice matters part and parcel of God’s expectation for His Church? Is there a “witness” alternative when socio-economic cleavage blocks communication? (E.g. what kind of penetration should the churches have been engaged in, in Watts, where the cleavage is most dramatic? Time may be running out for ministry by our churches in rural fringe areas as it is running out in Watts.)
- (2) Does a measure of justice for farm workers demand that they be organized into civic action and labor organizations? Are there alternatives?
- (3) Are we in favor of the organization of farm workers for self-help action on community issues and in regard to wages and working conditions?
- (4) If yes, should the churches be asked to support that effort?
- (5) If yes, again, what form or forms should that support take:
 - a. Legislative support, e.g., extension of NLRA to agricultural workers;
 - b. Program support within denominational and interdenominational channels e.g. present MM CD efforts and/or worker-minister program;
 - c. Dollar support, e.g. “National Missions” contributions to Cesar Chavez’ Farm Worker Association;
 - d. Program support outside the denominational and interdenominational channels, e.g., formation of a MM-type organization outside the existing institutional channels, financed by concerned Christians and targeted on organizing farm workers.
 - e. Education support, e.g. acquainting churchmen with the issues and encouraging sympathetic response to organizing efforts.
- (1) To what extent does the worker-minister proposal determine the future direction of the MM in California? (Personally, I see three (3) priority areas of activity:
 - c. Continued CD activity including worker-minister program;
 - d. Assistance to churches in developing new forms for carrying preaching, educational and sacramental life of the Christian community into low income areas, e.g., house church;
 - e. Mission education in sense of challenging churchmen with issues raised by struggle of farm workers for justice.)
- (3) To what extent will the worker-minister program undermine the working relationship between the State Migrant Ministry and local Migrant Ministry Committee?

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9/65