

## My Decision To Go With The Farm Workers Ministry c.1973

Frederick D. Eyster

Editor's Note: The Rev. Frederick D. Eyster, who served as Associate Pastor at Christ Church, United Church of Christ, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, recently elected to leave the parish ministry in order to join the National Farm Workers Ministry. The following statement is excerpted from his farewell sermon to the Bethlehem congregation.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to explain my decision at this time. For in a unique way, I feel *called* to the ministry for the first time in my life.

This ministry came into being within the last year as a successor to the Migrant Ministry. It is related to the National Council of Churches, supported by funding from denominations such as the United Church of Christ. The United Church Board for Homeland Ministries holds this ministry high in its priorities and is the largest denominational contributor.

Its purpose, according to one of its publications, is "to continue the religious presence with, and to ensure support for, farm workers as they organize to overcome their powerlessness and to achieve a measure of dignity and justice." The movement, or "La Cause," is best known as the United Farm Workers (UFW), the union headed by Cesar Chavez of California.

As most are aware, the farm workers are the only major segment of America's working population not covered by basic labor laws, such as the minimum wage, and therefore suffer undue hardships in their working life. Made up largely of minority groups—mainly Mexicans and blacks—these people are the poorest of the poor in America, the rather invisibly oppressed. Repressive legislation prevents them from organizing to make their needs known. Agriculture and business leaders conspire to keep them downtrodden.

What little progress has been made can be credited to Cesar Chavez and the UFW organization. You'll remember some notoriety was gained in the grape boycott of last year, in which California grape growers were finally forced to negotiate contracts with the unionized farm workers. Since that time, the popular understanding is that things are going well for them. That's deceptive! Approximately 99 per cent of America's farm workers are still without a union. So the organization has moved into a new effort: the lettuce boycott.

As to the Farm Workers Ministry itself, I quote again from their literature: The purpose is "to provide subsistence support for men and women from the churches who want to work full-time in the farm workers movement. Included in the work might be teaching in a free school for farm worker children, working in the fields prior to and during a strike, organizing ranch committees at farms under contract, community organization, developing support for the boycott, etc."

We will be the eighteenth couple to enter this ministry, which is presently working for the union. I emphasize that we will be paid subsistence wages, giving up our standard of

living and adopting the style of the farm workers—room and board and a minimal personal allowance.

Cesar Chavez is directly involved in assigning us. He will make an attempt to place us where our skills and interests are most useful. We know that we have to be mobile and flexible; ready to go where we are needed.

Among the several attractions of this ministry is the charisma of a man like Cesar, the spiritual side of the movement, the Christian aspect to the work as people give their lives to serving their brothers. There is a family model governing the movement, in which Cesar is the head and concern is shared for all who work in the movement. We are told that it is very hard work, but that the support derived from this kind of community is very rewarding.

On a personal level, there will be an opportunity for Sue and me to work mutually, a dream we have always shared. There is now a chance for us both to share work and home duties. There is a chance for us to test our commitment to radical witness. We've done a lot of talking, marching, and writing of letters. Now we can put our hands and feet where our mouths have been. There will also be the chance to try a new life style. For some time we have felt that the middle-class values are not so important to us, and that a simpler way of life may be as satisfying. At least, as we now try to unburden ourselves of property and financial commitments, we know how easily one gets "trapped." However, the most important of the personal reasons for the present decision is the "call." We're aware that many people *could* do this ministry, but may *won't*. By virtue of our age, experience and interests, we are in a unique position to respond, and therefore we feel compelled to do so.

Of course there are serious implications for the Eyster family. This is a risk we take: it might not work out. It will be tough on the kids: we've sought reassurance that there will be adequate health and educational coverage for their sakes. But at the same time there is the compensation of a new kind of life for the family; exposure to a different culture, a more inclusive home life for me. We see as many pluses as minuses in the implications for us.

There are also implications for the church. I hope this move of ours reminds you of the mission orientation of the church. Let me quote from a UFW newsletter: "Poor people organizing for change has been a traditional concern of the church. In the 1930's many church people supported the industrial unions in their early struggles. The major church bodies all have strong positions favoring the unionization of workers as a prerequisite to justice in an industrial society. . . . Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers are among the pioneer Christian servants of our time. . . . They are a powerful symbol of hope in our society. They have demonstrated that determined non-violent struggle can bring change. If we believe in non-violent change then it is imperative that we support such action when we see it.

I don't believe that we are leaving the ministry at all. If anything, we are becoming your missionaries on a new frontier.

There are even some practical suggestions for what you might do to support the movement. Educate yourselves to the situation of the farm worker in America. There is legislation, pending and already passed, which needs response and criticism from the public directed to legislators. You may support us financially, if that is possible. But in any case,

please support us with your prayers. And finally, you may boycott lettuce. The present need is to bring economic power to bear on the growers who repress the farm workers.

Freedom and equality are values for which the Farm Workers Ministry struggles as a way of helping “God mend ever flaw” in our country. I think it appropriate to lay these implications before you. To quote once more from the newsletter: “The National Farm Workers Ministry will be a link between the farm workers’ organizing struggle and that group of Christians who believe that love means action for their brother and who also believe that social justice is one important way that love takes shape in the world.”

### Additional Resources

Farm Labor Organizing 1905-1967: A Brief History, an excellent historical survey originally published by the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor. Copies are now available from the National Sharecroppers Fund, 112 East 19th Street, New York, N. Y. 10003.

Grapevine, January 1972 issue entitled “The Farmworkers Movement” is an excellent program piece for individuals and groups. Published by the Joint Strategy and Action Committee, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1700A, New York, N. Y. 10027.

Journal of Current Social Issues, November-December 1970 issue contains a California interview conducted by John R. Moyer, entitled “A Conversation with Cesar Chavez.”

Journal of Current Social Issues, Spring 1971 issue contains “A Continuing Conversation with Cesar Chavez,” based on a dialogue at Riverside Church in New York City, in which Mr. Chavez answers key questions.

Matthiessen, Peter, *Sal Si Puedes—Escape If You Can: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution*, Random House, New York, 1970. One of the best books so far on Chavez and the farm workers movement.

Steiner, Stan, *La Raza: The Mexican American*, Harper & Row, New York, 1969. A study of Mexican Americans today.

The Condition of Farm Workers and Small Farmers, issued annually by the National Sharecroppers Fund, 112 East 19th Street, New York, N. Y. 10003. Contains the latest facts on small farmers, hired farm workers, government programs, cooperative developments, rural poverty, discrimination, and NSF’s programs for rural America.