

# Cesar Chavez's Protestant Allies: The California Migrant Ministry and the Farm Workers

by Ronald A. Wells



*This study of the California Migrant Ministry responds to the majority of scholarship about the Farm Workers' Movement during the grape strikes in the 1960s, which has not fully acknowledged the deep religious roots of Latino civic engagement. The movement led by Cesar Chavez had an overall sense of disciplined spirituality that made it natural for the migrant ministry to work closely with the farm workers' union. This partnership caused furor among conservatives in Protestant churches in California and elsewhere. Because the California Migrant Ministry's director, Rev. Chris Hartmire, was an ordained Presbyterian minister, this was especially true in what was then called the United Presbyterian Church, the UPCUSA.*

While this is not a study of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers' Movement, as a study of Presbyterian minister Chris Hartmire and the California Migrant Ministry (CMM) in relation to Chavez and the movement he led, it will require some revision of our larger understanding of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers' Movement. In short, if a religious organization had something important to contribute to the social justice aspirations of Mexican Americans in the 1960s, then the larger movement must have been open to religious motives—and was possibly itself much more of a religious movement than scholars and journalists have hitherto seen.

Scholars agree that the African American Civil Rights Movement was, in large part, a religiously based struggle. There

is not yet scholarly agreement on whether Latino civic engagement was also, or as much, religiously based, although some recent scholarship is beginning to tend in that direction.<sup>1</sup> The view suggested here is that we lose an essential quality of Latino civic engagement, especially in the form of the Farm Workers' Movement, if we ignore the religious dimension.

The California Migrant Ministry was an ecumenical, Protestant group, a creature of the National Council of Churches (NCC), with the task of bringing the ministry of mercy and justice to the California valleys where most American fruits and vegetables are produced, in what has been called "the factories in the fields."<sup>2</sup> The work of Chris Hartmire and the California Migrant Ministry is explicable only on those

terms—that the quest for justice and dignity for farm workers had a moral and religious basis.<sup>3</sup>

Cesar Chavez is to Mexican Americans what Martin Luther King, Jr., is to African Americans—a leader of iconic stature. To be sure, there was only one Dr. King. It does not diminish the memory of Cesar Chavez to say that, second only to Dr. King, he was one of the most important Christian activists in our time, and one of the premier advocates of social justice through nonviolence.

Chavez died in 1993, and since that time there has been a struggle to define his legacy. There is a vigorous debate among the former volunteers in the Farm Workers' Movement, thirty years later, recalling the struggle. There are some bitter disagreements in the essays and postings on the web site hosted by

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Construction of the Union de los Campesinos California mission clinic, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., c. 1955 (UPCUSA Support Agency Photographs, RG 303).

LeRoy Chatfield, the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.<sup>4</sup> The debate is equally intense in the realm of scholarship. One scholar, Steven Lloyd-Moffett, takes a very assertive stance in describing that struggle. Even if we might have wished the author to be a bit less combative, we can see his point.

The image [of Cesar Chavez] that has emerged and come to dominate the public discourse is erroneous and unbalanced. He has been championed as a social and political activist driven by a secular ideology of justice and non-violence. Yet, contrary to common historical record, it was his personal spirituality and not a secularized ‘ideology’ that informed his activism.... Seeking to co-opt Chavez and his cause those who have defined his legacy—the liberal intelligencia and Chicano activists—embarked on a conscious, consistent and comprehensive agenda to secularize Chavez and to substitute their own values for his stated motivations. In the process,

they erased the spiritual basis of his public record, thereby creating the “Christ-less” Chavez of popular perception. By eviscerating the spiritual core of the most famous Latino civil activist they also perpetuated the widespread notion of a breach between religion and social engagement in Latino culture.... As a result, the legacy of Chavez needs balancing. He is a social activist but not only a social activist. Rather, he is a unique breed of social reformer whose basis for action is derived from his mystical encounters with God.<sup>5</sup>

Cesar Chavez was a labor leader. Arguably, he was, as some scholars suggest, the essential Chicano.<sup>6</sup> Chavez was both of those, but he was much more besides; he was a deeply committed Christian, and if we lose sight of that, we lose sight of the essence of the person. As journalist Frank Bardacke comments, “What many of the liberals and radicals on the staff of the union could never understand was that all the fasts, the long marches and the insistence on personal sacrifice...

were not publicity gimmicks, they were the essential Chavez.”<sup>7</sup>

The observation that guides this study—that there is more religion in the Farm Workers’ Movement than most scholars realize—is illuminated by the work of the California Migrant Ministry. The interpretive implications are also clear. If what is said here rings true, scholars will have to revise our overall estimate about Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers’ Movement.<sup>8</sup>

## Marching for Change

The 1960s were known for many things, among them marching to advocate for social change. This was especially true for the Civil Rights Movement—most memorably the 1965 march in Alabama from Selma to Montgomery—in which committed people showed the value of marching.<sup>9</sup>

One march of the 1960s that is little celebrated in the rest of the United States, even though it was a galvanizing experience for Mexican Americans, was the march in 1966 from Delano, California, to the state capitol in Sacramento. On one level, the march was about recognition of the United Farm Workers union as the legitimate agent to represent the farm workers. But, in a larger sense, it was also about demanding recognition from Anglo-America that Mexican Americans were legitimate players in American life. It was, in fact, more than a march; it was a pilgrimage—a term that invokes the religious meaning of the event and explains the fervor with which the marchers invoked its religious symbols. The leaders very self-consciously chose for the slogan of the march words appropriate to the cause and to the holy season of Lent: “*Peregrinacion, Penitencia, Revolucion,*” “Pilgrimage, Penitence, Revolution.” As Chavez explained in an open letter,

Throughout the Spanish-speaking world there is another tradition that touches the present march, that of Lenten penitential processions. . . . [It is] in the blood of the Mexican-American and the Delano March will therefore be one of penance—public penance for the sins of the strikers, their own personal sins as well as their yielding perhaps to feelings of hatred and revenge in the strike itself. They hope by the march to set themselves at peace with the Lord, so that the justice of their cause will be purified of lesser motivations.<sup>10</sup>

They ended their pilgrimage on Good Friday and held a large rally, begun with Mass, at the Capitol on Easter Sunday.<sup>11</sup>

When the marching pilgrims, about three hundred strong, left the union headquarters in California’s great Central Valley, it could not be predicted how much support Cesar Chavez and his colleagues would pick up. Music led them on their way. The sound of trumpets pierced the haze of those California spring mornings, and the quiet rhythm of guitars kept the beat for walkers showing one of the first demonstrations of Brown Power. When the marching column—always with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in front—had covered the approximately 300 miles and finally arrived in Sacramento, the group had swelled to many thousands. The most memorable speech on the steps of the capitol that Easter Sunday was, in fact, not by Cesar Chavez—although he was the acknowledged soul of “La Mexicanidad”—but by Dolores Huerta, Chavez’s right-hand person, who gave the Farm Workers’ Movement much of its passion.<sup>12</sup> She insisted that California—and America—could no longer take Mexican Americans for granted, and that their presence at the capitol that Easter Sunday embodied the long-denied quest for dignity and justice. She called on Governor Edmund Brown to call a special session of the legislature to enact collective-bargaining laws for farm workers in California. Moreover, she lauded the example set by Cesar Chavez, that if this battle was to be won, no one was going to do it for the workers. They had to do it themselves. At the same time, she was glad that the farm workers had many friends among Anglo-Americans, and she was glad people other than Mexican Americans were there too: “We are not alone but are joined by many friends.”<sup>13</sup>

In the crowd that day, the friends included members of the California Migrant Ministry (CMM), led by the Rev. Chris Hartmire, director of the ministry. Hartmire followed Huerta to the podium and gave some remarks that rang out on the day, and still do today in the memories of some who were present. First, Hartmire was very critical of Governor Brown, who had been asked to meet with the marchers, but instead chose to be in Palm Springs for Easter with his family and with his friend, Frank Sinatra. Second, Hartmire spoke of the spiritual roots of his and the California Migrant Ministry’s involvement with the United Farm Workers.



Cesar Chavez regularly thanks the churches and churchmen for their support of the farm worker's cause; he really shouldn't have to. Standing with oppressed people ought to be as natural as breathing or singing hymns. It should be part of our daily life, unexceptional and uncontroversial. But as many of you know it is not necessarily so. In fact the Protestant churches of the state are involved in a costly internal struggle to decide the future course of the Migrant Ministry. Like Peter, James and John, we have discovered that following Jesus is most difficult when it is costly....

I would like to say a special thank you to Cesar and to Fred Ross. They have taught us new things about courage and honesty and hope. Most of all they have helped us see the world as it really is, in place of the pleasant world we imagine for our comfort's sake. Farm workers suffer in this world, not just by accident but because some men live of the sweat of their brows and because too many of us are silent and complacent. Men live at the expense of other men in that real world. Important people lie in public and conspire in private to maintain their own privilege....

All is not bleak in that real world, and thank God for the hope of this glorious Easter morning. But there is too much pain and too much loneliness and too much human suffering—and Jesus cares—and Christians should be free enough to face the worst honestly and then take risks for the sake of their brothers. If that means losing some institutional flesh and blood, then we will be closer to the Lord who loved life but gave his flesh and blood for the world....<sup>14</sup>

There had never been a successful attempt to organize agricultural workers in the United States before. The success of the movement under Cesar Chavez was mostly due to his special qualities of charisma and his skill in organization. Without Chavez, nothing much could have been accomplished. But, as he later said, the early and constant support of the California Migrant Ministry was a vital part of that success.<sup>15</sup>

For Chavez, success and justice were to be accomplished through nonviolence and would be a matter of "soul force," as Mahatma Gandhi and

Dr. King would have said. One of the main ideas Chavez learned from Gandhi was the strategic use of fasting. He believed that one should not direct fasting against opponents, but towards friends and allies, to motivate them to bring the movement back into focus, and especially to keep it nonviolent at a time when union people are being intimidated and attacked. One Lenten season, Chris Hartmire assembled a small group in Los Angeles to fast during Holy Week as a witness for peace in Vietnam. Chavez visited them, and he told them what fasting meant to him. As one of the group, Fr. Louis Vitale later recalled, for Chavez a fast was an opportunity to explore before God his own motives, and to be sure that the movement was God's own doing. That way he could be sure that he and the movement would remain nonviolent.<sup>16</sup>

One of Cesar Chavez's most noted fasts was a twenty-five-day ordeal begun in mid-February 1968. The farm workers' union issued a statement in English and Spanish to explain what Chavez was doing. It was, the UFW stated, to be "a fast of penance and hope, in which Chavez's pain reminds us of the suffering of farm workers." It was also a call to the farm workers to pledge themselves again to nonviolence toward "those who have placed themselves in the position of adversaries." Further, if the farm workers had violated the commitment to nonviolence in thought or deed, Chavez would do penance for all. The union also wanted the fast to be seen as a symbol of hope in which Chavez would embody the only way—through nonviolence—that a movement of social justice could go forward. The statement ends with a ringing endorsement of Chavez's essential theme, that we find life when we risk it for others. In English, the statement ends by saying that Chavez's act of penance "beckons" each of us to participate in a worldwide struggle for justice. The Spanish translation is better. It says that the fast "calls" [*"nos llama a cada uno de nosotros"*] us to that struggle.<sup>17</sup> Chavez broke the fast after twenty-five days, on the urgent advice of his doctor. That day, he was too weak to speak to the approximately eight thousand supporters who had gathered at the union headquarters in Delano. Chavez issued a statement in English and Spanish. He chose Rev. Jim Drake of the California Migrant Ministry to read it.

My warm thanks to all of you for coming today. Many of you have been here before and during the Fast. Some have sent beauti-



The March 10, 1968, celebration Mass at which Cesar Chavez broke his twenty-five-day fast. Rev. Chris Hartmire served the host to Chavez (at right), Senator Robert Kennedy (to Chavez's left), and Mrs. Helen Chavez (at left). Photo by John Kouns, from the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project, at [www.farmworkermovement.us](http://www.farmworkermovement.us).

ful cards and telegrams, and made offerings at the Mass. All of these expressions of your love have strengthened me and I am grateful. We should all thank Senator Kennedy for his constant work on behalf of the poor, and for his personal encouragement to me, and for taking the time to break bread with us today.... We are gathered today not so much to observe the end of the Fast but because we are a Union family celebrating the non-violent nature of our movement. Perhaps in the future we will come together at other times and places to break bread and to renew our courage, and to celebrate important victories.... The Fast was not intended as a pressure against any growers. For that reason we have suspended negotiations and arbitration proceedings and relaxed the militant picketing and boycotting during the fast period. I undertook this Fast because my heart was filled with grief and pain for

the suffering of farm workers. The Fast was first for me and then for all of us in the Union. It was a Fast for non-violence and a call of sacrifice. 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 own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons. 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 determine what kind of men we are. It is my deepest beliefs that only by giving our lives do we find life...in a totally non-violent struggle for justice.<sup>18</sup>

On that special day, March 10, 1968, the celebration Mass was noteworthy. Fr. Mark Day, on loan to the union staff from the Franciscan Order,

was celebrant. When the communion elements had been consecrated, Father Day passed them to Rev. Chris Hartmire to serve it to the people in the front row. Hartmire first served Chavez. The Presbyterian minister then turned to serve the host to the next person, sitting on Chavez's right. It was Senator Robert Kennedy, then campaigning for the presidency, but with only three months to live, as we now know. A picture of the communion scene has been reproduced in many publications, and is itself now a kind of icon.<sup>19</sup>

Spring and summer 1968, which saw the murders of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, was a dramatic moment in American history. In late March 1968, Cesar Chavez was on the cover of *Time* magazine. In addition to a story about him and the movement, the magazine reprinted a statement Chavez had written for a conference of Mexican Americans. The statement—"The Mexican American and the Church"—is of great importance to this study, so an excerpt follows. Early in the 1960s, he writes,

We began to run into the California Migrant Ministry in the camps and the fields. They were about the only ones there, and a lot of us were suspicious, since we were Catholics and they were Protestants. However, they had developed a very clear conception of the Church. It was called to serve, to be at the mercy of the poor, and not to try to use them. After a while this made a lot of sense to us. In fact it forced us to ask, why do Protestants come out here and help the people, demand nothing, and give all their time to serving farm workers, while our own parish priests stay in their churches? When the strike started in 1965 they told us we could not even use the Church auditorium for the meetings. The farm workers' money helped to build that auditorium! But, the Protestants were there again, in the form of the California Migrant Ministry, and they began to help us in little ways, here and there. When the strike started in 1965, most of our friends forsook us for a while. They ran, or were just too busy to help. But the California Migrant Ministry held a meeting with its staff and decided that the strike was a matter of life and death for farm workers everywhere, and even if it meant the end of the Migrant Ministry they

would turn over their resources to the strikers. The political pressure on the Protestant churches was tremendous and the Migrant Ministry lost a lot of money. But they stuck it out and began to point the way for the rest of the Church.<sup>20</sup>

### **Chris Hartmire and Migrant Ministry**

When Chris Hartmire was growing up in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, in the 1930s and 1940s, his middle-class upbringing could not have prepared him to be a participant in one of the great social movements of our time.<sup>21</sup> In 1950, he went to Princeton University on a scholarship to be a civil engineer. In the summers, Hartmire worked at a summer camp for poor boys, run by Princeton in Trenton and Philadelphia. That experience of service caused something to form in his mind and heart. Hartmire had found his vocation for ministry to the poor. When he graduated from Princeton as a civil engineer, two decisions set the future for his life: marriage and seminary. He married his high school sweetheart, Jane Eichner. Hartmire still marvels at the good fortune of having a partner who supported him, and who did more than her share of raising the four kids when ministry perhaps took him away from home for too many days. After a stint in the Navy, his choice to attend Union Seminary in New York was also important, because there he was able to focus on a theology of service. Especially by focusing his training on reading the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hartmire crystallized his calling to serve the poor.

Hartmire was ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1960 and served on the staff of the East Harlem Protestant Parish in New York. That parish was a multi-site congregation founded by people from Union Seminary, in an attempt to bring a mainline Protestant and ecumenical presence back to areas of Harlem that had been abandoned by white flight. Hartmire was youth minister at the Brooklyn site of the Parish, and he was very energized by the work. But the Hartmires sensed that this was not to be a permanent position, and that they would probably move when the right opportunity for service came open.

Back in seminary days, the young couple had done a summer internship working for the California Migrant Ministry. Hartmire must have impressed the CMM director, the Rev. Doug Still. When Still was about to leave his post a few



years later, he asked Hartmire to succeed him as CMM director. Still's call came at a time when the Hartmires believed that their time in New York was coming to a natural end. This call occasioned much soul-searching for Chris and Jane Hartmire. This Eastern-oriented couple, without full Spanish fluency, had little experience with ministry in rural areas. They wondered if it was the right call for them. But many people they respected urged them to take it. Looking back forty-five years later, he and Mrs. Hartmire see it as a true call to the dynamic life of service they have led in California.

Chris Hartmire arrived in Los Angeles in 1961 and inherited a ministry that had been launched in New Jersey in the 1920s and in California during the Great Depression to minister to the people that John Steinbeck made known in his writing. The ministry did good things for the people of the "rural slums" of the valleys, as Dean Collins, Director of the CMM in the 1950s, had first called them.<sup>22</sup> Later in the 1950s, a new director, Doug Still, would implement Collins' vision and establish a "rural fringe ministry" in several of the rural slums in the San Joaquin and Imperial Valleys.<sup>23</sup> Those ministry activities included camps for children during harvest time when their parents were working long hours, boys' and girls' clubs all year, English classes, personal hygiene classes, and sometimes a well-baby clinic.<sup>24</sup> These were good things for church folk to do for the people literally on the other side of the railroad tracks, and local Protestant congregations supported them. But in the 1960s a question began to emerge among some Christian leaders, including Chris Hartmire: people needed these good services because they were poor; Hartmire wanted to do something about the causes of poverty.

Farm work is seasonal by its nature. Many families had to follow the crops. Some families might try to settle in one place, but then they had to endure separation from those who worked the fields in various places. Also, American farm workers suffered wage competition from "guest workers" from Mexico. The Bracero Program, begun in 1942 as a war measure, allowed Mexican men to come over without their families for specific periods of time, live in military-style barracks, and then go home when the work was done. The braceros were glad for the jobs, since they had little work in Mexico, and they agreed to work for less than American workers. The program kept wages low for everyone in the fields and was extended well beyond the war,

because it benefited the growers so handsomely, and because poor Mexicans cooperated.<sup>25</sup>

Chris Hartmire could scarcely get his feet on the ground in California before the situation required that he become one of the point people in lobbying against the Bracero Program. Along with other leaders, Hartmire believed that farm workers, by then mainly Mexican Americans, would never be able to climb out of poverty as long as there was unfair competition for jobs from the braceros. In the early 1960s many religious communities joined labor groups in persuading Congress to end the program at the end of 1963. In the eyes of many growers, even some prominent Presbyterians, Hartmire crossed the line of acceptable behavior in joining forces with those calling for the end of the Bracero Program. Soon thereafter, Hartmire was to cross another line that would endear him to some Christians but cause him to be extremely disliked by others: he became closely associated with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers union.

### **Chris Hartmire and Cesar Chavez Together**

Chavez was born on his family's farm in Arizona.<sup>26</sup> He became a migrant worker when his family lost the farm during the Great Depression. Like many other Americans, they had to go on the road in California, looking for agricultural work. Chavez had to quit school in the eighth grade to contribute to the family's income. He knew personally the bitter feelings resulting from poverty and racism. He received training in community organization from Fred Ross at the Community Service Organization. That training, and the many personal contacts Chavez made while working all over California for the CSO, would be invaluable when he began his work organizing with the farm workers.<sup>27</sup> In 1962, Chavez and his wife Helen came to the decision that Mexican American farm workers would never receive justice in the fields nor achieve human dignity in society until they had their own union to speak for them. In 1962 The Chavez family moved to Delano, so that Helen could have the support of her family in the area when Chavez would be on the road organizing for the union.

Events in 1965 were to overtake Cesar Chavez and Chris Hartmire. In September, Filipino grape workers around Delano went on strike. A few days later, the largely Mexican-American membership of Chavez's United Farm Workers voted to join forces with the Filipinos. Chavez wasn't sure that his



Cesar Chavez and Chris Hartmire, c. 1968 (courtesy of Chris Hartmire).

union was ready for a long strike, but he allowed the workers to decide for themselves. They chose to express their solidarity with the Filipinos and join the strike. About a week later, Chavez called in Hartmire and asked that the California Migrant Ministry support the strike.

For Hartmire and his staff, it was momentous. He agreed with Chavez on the general point that most of the power in agribusiness lay with the growers, and that justice required a re-arrangement of power dynamics to allow for an organization through which the workers could speak for themselves. Well, that was one thing philosophically, but what about a Christian ministry taking sides in a labor dispute? For Hartmire and for the CMM oversight body, the California Church Council, the strike was much more than merely a labor dispute. For them, it was an unprecedented opportunity to witness to their theology of Christ as being the Lord of all life.<sup>28</sup> The farm workers were, and still are, among the least powerful and poorest paid workers in the United States. Here was an opportunity, Hartmire thought, to show the churches' witness on behalf of "the least of these brethren." And so began the churches' part in a long and only partially successful struggle between the farm workers and the growers, along with the latter's powerful allies in banking and government.

Chris Hartmire was both loved and despised in the Christian community. In early 1968, a church in Visalia, California, organized a debate on the question of the church's relationship to the strike and the national boycott of table grapes. The main speakers were Chavez, Hartmire and Allan Grant, a prominent Presbyterian layman from Visalia, who was also president of the California Farm Bureau,

the main organization of growers. Chavez sensed the mood of the meeting, whispering to Hartmire: "They are angrier with you than with me!" That stormy meeting in Visalia was a preview of the battle for the allegiance of Presbyterians that would continue in the pages of *Presbyterian Life*, the flagship magazine of what was then known as the United Presbyterian Church.

The October 1968 issue of *Presbyterian Life* contained an article by Lincoln Richardson on Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers' Movement. While the author did not specifically endorse the strike and boycott of table grapes, it was as sympathetic a piece as can be imagined. The author placed the action in the contemporary setting of the Coachella Valley, just south and east of Palm Springs. Readers get a friendly insight into the day-to-day operations of a union on strike and into the whole structure of support among people of faith. Two kinds of people objected to the presence of so much religion in the strike: secular union people who didn't want religion to mix with economics, and conservative religious people who didn't want religion "used" in this way. To both views, Chavez was said to reply, "They don't understand our people. Religion is a part of our people."<sup>29</sup>

Richardson's article detailed the support from the Franciscan Order and from the California Migrant Ministry, but it also gave some coverage to the presbyteries of Los Angeles and San Joaquin, both of which voted to stay neutral in the strike and boycott. Indeed. Many Presbyterians in California and the West were upset that their denominational magazine had apparently taken a side on this struggle. Therefore, it was arranged that Allan Grant would also write an article, and that it would appear in *Presbyterian Life* as soon as possible, which was in December 1968.

Grant warned readers not to be swayed by sympathies, but only by facts, and he meant his article to rebut Richardson's by a marshalling of facts. The first fact is that the organizers of the strike were not local people but outsiders, like Larry Itliong and Al Green, both veteran organizers for the AFL-CIO in several Western states. Grant singled out Cesar Chavez, a person who had only come to Delano a few years before, not to work, but with the express intent of union organizing—a skill he was said to have learned from the noted radical Saul Alinsky and his Community Service Organization (CSO). Second, Grant challenged the UFW's allegation that the workers were at the mercy of the growers,



citing many state laws that protected workers. Third, Grant tried to counter the union's insistence that workers were underpaid and therefore lived in poverty and in deprived conditions. Grant documented that hourly wages for agricultural labor in California were higher than the national average, and that many Mexicans used family members to supplement family incomes. He allowed that they were "not high incomes, but not incomes on which people starve."<sup>30</sup> Finally, Grant challenged the motives of Chavez and the strike leaders, saying that the strike was about Chavez's personal ambition and his desire to gain from raking in union dues from the large number of Mexican-American workers in California.

The "facts" laid out by Grant were at least plausible to many Presbyterians, and persuasive to some. Since the credibility of the strike and boycott was on the line, it was imperative for the union and the migrant ministry to counter the arguments Grant had put forward. The sometimes-bitter battle for church support would go on at the meetings of various presbyteries, dioceses, and congregations, and also in the pages of *Presbyterian Life*. The California Migrant Ministry was very active in issuing information bulletins and in distributing them through its volunteer networks. In general, the CMM's retorts to Grant in the battle of the churches went like this: While conceding that the strike leaders were not originally from Delano, they documented that most strikers were; while acknowledging that some farm workers received higher hourly wages than the national average, they pointed out that farm work was seasonal by nature, and that annual incomes for farm work families fell below needs; while conceding that family members did work together, the CMM thought it was unfortunate that women and children indeed had to work in the fields, and, even at that, many families were in poverty. Finally, the suggestion that Chavez and leaders like Dolores Huerta were in it for the money was dismissed as too ludicrous to be discussed. Whether or not the migrant ministry's answers to Grant's allegations were sufficient was—and still is—a matter of dispute among church people in California's agricultural valleys.

An article published in *Presbyterian Life* in 1969 also offers keen insight into Chris Hartmire's thinking. Hartmire appealed to his fellow church people by stating that all Presbyterians think Jesus's call results in service to others. That was virtually non-negotiable: the only question was what form the



A minister talks with the mother of a California migrant family as she does her laundry. Many in the camp worked in the California cantaloupe fields, c. 1960 (UPCUSA Support Agency Photographs, RG 303).

servanthood of the church might take. Hartmire then took the readers through the thinking that had developed among the staff of the migrant ministry in the prior fifteen years, since Dean Collins had directed it. The farm workers were unorganized and therefore vulnerable to exploitation. For Hartmire and his staff, the CMM's support of the union turned on a belief that "the plight of the seasonal farm workers is a long-standing blot on the conscience of America."<sup>31</sup> He further argued that the ministry's developing thinking on "charitable" work upset some people in California churches because it rearranged thinking about the status of church people in society. To do "charitable" work—even if "successful" projects—nevertheless reinforced the patterns of the status quo and of who had power over whom in society. Chris Hartmire's belief was radical indeed, in that he would take money and support from established churches and, by being servants to the farm workers, aid in their own self-determination and empowerment.

Hartmire's analysis must have caused many readers' eyebrows to rise when he told of the

reverberations he thought would follow the hoped-for success in California. He saw the results of the struggle then-centered in Delano, California, as crucial to how social justice aspirations through the United States might go: “The organization [UFW] is focused in California, but the future of all farm workers is tied to Cesar Chavez and the pioneer workers with him in Delano. If the Delano strikers can succeed, then energy and hope will be released to workers throughout the nation.”<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Prior to the rise and success of the United Farm Workers under Cesar Chavez, there had been a string of failures, reaching back many decades, to organize farm workers. Those attempts had been among Anglos, Filipinos, and Mexicans, and sometimes with those ethnic groups combining forces. But all had failed for one reason or another, except for one constant factor. The power of the growers, in league with ranchers, bankers, and officials of local governments and law enforcement, was just too strong for the workers to overcome. In the past, it had been easy to label union activity as “communist”—partly because the tiny Communist Party was around in the fields, but mostly because powerful people could get away with “red-baiting” fairly easily. Also, while there had been some good leaders in the past, there were none quite as loved and organizationally effective as Cesar Chavez. Moreover, Chavez was a Christian, and, unlike some other prior secular leaders, his faith guided his life in a transparent way that ordinary *campesinos* (farm workers) could understand. No one had to tell them why the march to Sacramento was called a pilgrimage or that it should culminate on Easter.

But beyond all the above, the UFW of Cesar Chavez had the support of Protestant mainline churches in a way no prior movement ever had. There were many Christians, both clergy and lay, who worked for “La Causa” in many ways: giving money to help buy necessities for strikers’ families; giving time to be on the picket lines in the valley and on the boycott lines in supermarket parking lots across North America; writing letters to politicians and newspapers denying that Cesar Chavez’s movement was “communistic”; and documenting the farm workers’ heroic nonviolence, especially in the face of the “goon squads” hired by some growers. When one looks closely at all the various kinds of Protestant support, one mostly finds

that the catalyst for that activity was the California Migrant Ministry. When Christians stood on the picket line or got roughed up by local cops, the call to come out and help had come from Chris Hartmire or his staff. When conservatives in churches in farming areas demanded that their denominations withdraw support from ministries to the farm workers, it was Chris Hartmire or Jim Drake who spoke to church boards of all kinds and to synods, assemblies, and conventions.

One could possibly imagine the farm workers’ success without the California Migrant Ministry, but it didn’t happen that way. Indeed, as Cesar Chavez said many times, the union might well not have survived had not Chris Hartmire and the CMM been there. In past episodes, the growers were able to break a strike within six to nine months, before community support could build. Because of the credibility of the migrant ministry, and its lack of fear of the growers, it could stay with the UFW and bring in the community support necessary.<sup>33</sup>

The middle years of the 1960s were a special era in American history. Especially regarding Civil Rights, it seemed like America was ready to move forward and begin to overcome historic injustices. So, too, for farm workers of all races, the poorest paid and worst treated of all American workers, it seemed like a moment when justice might be done and human dignity affirmed.

Seamus Heaney’s much-quoted lines from *The Cure at Troy* are instructive here: “History says don’t hope on this side of the grave. But then, once in a lifetime, a tidal wave of justice will rise up and hope and history rhyme.”<sup>34</sup> Chris Hartmire, backed by his staff at the California Migrant Ministry, believed that the farm workers’ struggle was a moment when a tidal wave of justice might rise up, and they were determined to be there for Cesar Chavez and his comrades. After 1965, and for the next decade, the migrant ministry either de-emphasized or stopped its other ministries to focus thoroughly on being servants to the farm workers and to back their aspirations for empowerment.

It was a hard struggle. For some of the migrant ministry staff, it meant ill health and broken marriages. It was hard on Chris Hartmire and his family. In fact, one of his sons wrote in *Newsweek* about some painful memories of the movement, which had taken his Dad away too much during his growing-up years.<sup>35</sup> So all was not triumph and delight for Chris Hartmire to have found his vocation in the hot valleys of California.

In due time, the workers' chosen union sat at bargaining tables with growers. Contracts were hammered out that allowed for a semblance of justice and dignity to come to "the factories in the fields," namely, toilets and drinking water at the harvest sites. Pay was raised somewhat, so that farm workers could begin a slow crawl up from poverty and malnutrition. To be sure, the kingdom had not yet come to the great agricultural valleys of California. Many reverses would lie ahead for Cesar Chavez and his union, and the conflicted memories of some supporters might leave some unanswered questions about the cause.<sup>36</sup> But for Chris Hartmire and the California Migrant Ministry, it had all been worth it. As Cesar Chavez often said, we have nothing better to do with our lives than work for others and for justice, a belief echoed by Chris Hartmire, a Presbyterian minister on the front lines for justice in the fields of California. *℟*

## Postscript

The Prayer of the Farm Workers' Struggle  
By Cesar Chavez

Show me the suffering of the most miserable,  
so I will know my people's plight.  
Free me to pray for others,  
for you are present in every person.  
Help me to take responsibility for my own life,  
so that I can be free at last.  
Grant me courage to serve others,  
for in service there is true life.  
Give me honesty and patience,  
so that the Spirit will be alive among us.  
Let the Spirit flourish and grow,  
so that we shall never tire of the struggle.  
Let us remember those who have died for justice,  
for they have given us life.  
Help us love even those who hate us,  
so we can change the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Espinoza, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, eds., *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Also see Dan La Botz, *Cesar Chavez and La Causa* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), esp. 61-67.

<sup>2</sup> Cary McWilliams, *Factories in the Fields, The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939).

<sup>3</sup> Pat Hoffman, *Ministry of the Dispossessed: Learning From the Farm Worker Movement* (Los Angeles: Wallace Press, 1987); Sydney D. Smith, *Grapes of Conflict* (Pasadena, CA: Hope Publishing Company, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.farmworkermovement.org](http://www.farmworkermovement.org).

<sup>5</sup> Steven R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of Cesar Chavez," in Espinoza, *Latino Religions*, 35-36.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard Garcia, *Cesar Chavez: A Triumph of the Spirit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), esp. 96-115. Also important on this point is Jose Angel Gutierrez, "Cesar Chavez: The First and Last of the Chicano Leaders," *San Jose Studies* 20 (1994): 32-44.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Bardecke, "Cesar's Ghost: The Decline and Fall of the UFW," *The Nation*, July 26, 1993: 135.

<sup>8</sup> Important in the revision will be insights like those of John Hammerback, "Cesar Chavez: Teacher of Truth," *San Jose Studies* 20 (1994): 10-15.

<sup>9</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); Juan Williams,

*Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Viking, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Winthrop Yinger, *Cesar Chavez: The Rhetoric of Nonviolence* (Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press, 1975), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Espinoza, *Latino Religions*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Castillo and Garcia, *Cesar Chavez*, 59-75.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, *Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 117-123.

<sup>14</sup> "Remarks by Wayne C. Hartmire at the Farm Workers Rally in Sacramento, California, April 10, 1966." Archives of the National Farm Worker Ministry, in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter Ruether Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, box 4, folder 4 [hereinafter the archives will be cited as "Wayne State" and location].

<sup>15</sup> Hoffman, *Ministry of the Dispossessed*, viii; Smith, *Grapes of Conflict*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Louis Vitale, "A Memory of Fasting," in Ann McGregor and Cindy Wathen, eds., *Remembering Cesar: The Legacy of Cesar Chavez* (Clovis, CA: Quill Driver Books, 2000), 72.

<sup>17</sup> "Statement on the Fast for Non-Violence," February 25, 1968, United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. Wayne State, box 6, folder 2.

<sup>18</sup> This statement is also at Wayne State, but it can be accessed more easily through a state of California educational website, along with several other Chavez statements, at <http://chavez.cde.ca.gov/ModelCurriculum/Teachers/Lessons/>



Resources/Documents/EXR1\_Cesar\_E\_Chavez\_Statements\_on\_Fasts.pdf (accessed February 26, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Day, *Forty Acres: Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 114ff.

<sup>20</sup> This statement can be found in many places, but most easily in *Time*, April 8, 1968; online it can be found at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/cesarchavezspeechmexicanamerican&church.htm> (accessed January 29, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Conversations between Hartmire and the author, Claremont, California, October 25 and November 15, 2005. Many points in this section of the text are drawn from the same conversations unless otherwise stated.

<sup>22</sup> "The Problem of the Rural Slums of California," Wayne State, box 4, folder 2.

<sup>23</sup> "The Rural Fringe Ministry," Wayne State, box 4, folder 2.

<sup>24</sup> "Annual Report, 1962," Casa de Amistad Community Center, Brawley, California, Wayne State, box 7, folder 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Charlotte, CA: McNally and Lofton, 1964); Richard Craig, *The Bracero Program* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972).

<sup>26</sup> There is not yet a definitive biography of Cesar Chavez. The Griswold del Castillo and Garcia volume, cited in note 6, is very good. The best to date and most recent

is Dan La Botz's biography, cited in note 1. Also useful is Richard W. Etulain's effort in the Bedford Book series, *Cesar Chavez: A Brief Biography With Documents* (Boston: Bedford / St. Martins, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Fred Ross, *Conquering Goliath: Cesar Chavez at the Beginning* (Keene, CA: El Taller Grafico Press, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Good accounts of the Migrant Ministry's thinking on the theology of supporting the strike can be found in Hoffman, *Ministry of the Dispossessed*, 31-53, and Smith, *Grapes of Conflict*, 99-107.

<sup>29</sup> Lincoln Richardson, "Cesar Chavez," *Presbyterian Life*, October 1, 1968, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Allan Grant, "California Grapes and the Boycott: The Grower's Side of the Story," *Presbyterian Life*, December 1, 1968, 35.

<sup>31</sup> "Servanthood Among the Seasonal Farm Workers," *Presbyterian Life*, March 1, 1969, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>33</sup> La Botz, *Cesar Chavez*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> *The Cure at Troy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1991), 77.

<sup>35</sup> John Hartmire, "At the Heart of a Historic Movement," *Newsweek*, July 24, 2000, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Meta Mendel-Reyes, "Remembering Cesar," *Radical History Review* 58 (1994): 142-150.