A Position Paper for Churchmen With Regard to the Farm-Labor Issue Fr. Richard Humphrys

Introduction: Dear Friends: For the past several years, church groups of several denominations here and in Canada have backed a boycott of table grapes and lettuce not harvested by the United Farm Workers. Their motives were sincere but the results have been destructive. Much of the acreage has been lost, farm workers have lost jobs, and a large segment of farmers and those affiliated with them have been alienated from their respective churches. The farmer feels that the churches have not fairly presented his side of the story. They are particularly upset by the great number of mis-statements and distortions that have appeared in church papers. It would seem that there is need for a new attitude of churchmen toward farmers and the farm community. The same can be said with regard to their attitude toward and appraisal of the two union involved, the U.F.W. and the Teamsters. All too often, church statements lack balance. They present the evils done by growers or Teamsters without presenting the good things they do. Also, they do not present the abuses of the U.F.W. along with the many good things they have accomplished. In fact, therefore, churchmen are guilty of taking sides on a highly controversial issue. The results have been decreased church attendance and the alienation of clergymen from their congregations. Much re-thinking and re-evaluation must be done. The principles of charity and justice must be equally applied not only to the U.F.W. but also to the farmers and the Teamsters. For these reasons I present the following position paper for churchmen. These points will be considered.

I. Should churchmen continue support of the boycott?
II. How should church papers etc. present the farm-labor issue?
What mis-statements have been made in various church papers?
II.A. What should be the attitude of churchmen with regard to the two unions?

I. Should churchmen continue support of the boycott? No, for the following reasons:

#1. The boycott is harming the very workers it was supposed to help. In the Coachella Valley 120 of 150 table grape growers have been bankrupted. Acreage has been reduced by 40% (from 13,000 acres to 7,000 acres). This means that 40% of the jobs of our Mexican Americans of this area have been lost as a direct result of the boycott. The vineyard have been bulldozed or allowed to die. Since it takes 6 to 9 years to raise a good producing vine, it would seem that the damage already done is all but permanent. There is reason to believe that if the boycott continues much longer, almost the entire table grape industry (at least of the Coachella Valley) will be wiped out.

#2. Churchmen are supporting the boycott until free elections are held. What they do not realize is that free elections that could be legally binding, are impossible for the next three years. The reason is that the growers in the Coachella Valley signed four year contracts with the Teamsters in 1973. These legally binding contracts do not expire for three more years. Therefore, any election held before that time would have no power to invalidate the contracts now in force. If elections were held before that time, they would be no more than polls of worker preference.

#3. Cardinal Manning of Los Angeles and Bishop Donohoe of Fresno came out against the continued support of the boycott. These are two of the bishops most concerned with the California farm labor issue.

#4. The boycott (as it is supported by Mr. Meany and the A.P.L.C.O.) is not for the purpose of getting a union. It is for the purpose of saying that one and only one union (U.F.W.) can validly represent farm workers. Yet, the Teamsters get equal or better benefits for farm workers. We have never been successful in forcing all people to belong to one political party. It would seem we cannot force them into one union. Is it really good to have only one farm union? If the two unions must compete for membership by providing more benefits than the other union, the worker can only benefit from the competition. We should back both unions and not try to drive either from the labor scene.
be protected. In 1970, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which oversees the California Department of Health, mandated that 1970 unions and the State of California's Health and Welfare Department take action to protect farm workers from the risk of pesticide exposure. The workers must be informed of the potential hazards and the measures taken to protect them. The farm workers are also entitled to have a physician on call to provide medical care.

Farm workers are often exposed to pesticide contamination, which can cause serious health problems. The workers must be provided with protective clothing and other equipment to prevent exposure. The workers must also be provided with training in the proper use of the equipment.

The State of California has established a Pesticide Program to ensure that farm workers are protected from pesticide exposure. The program includes training, monitoring, and enforcement of safety regulations. The program also provides for the detection and correction of violations.

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which found no truth in the published charges.

#4. It is stated that farm workers' lives are drastically shortened because of the nature of their work. -- It is also stated that the death rates from accidents is very much higher. One church paper went so far as to say the death rate from accidents was 300% higher.

The Riverside Press Enterprise says, "No reliable information exists to support the contention that farm workers don't live as long as others. The actuarial tables of insurance companies identify farm work as non-hazardous."

#5. It is stated that a large percentage of farm workers are migratory.

The American Farm Bureau Federation says, "Most people mistakenly think that all farm workers are migrants. Actually, less than one in ten U.S. farm workers is a migrant... latest figures show that of the total of 2,571,000 farm workers, only 257,000 are migrants.

#6. It is charged that California agriculture is dominated by inhuman and cruel corporations and conglomerates. The American Farm Bureau Federation says, "Only 2.9% of California's commercial farms are corporation owned" and many of these are family corporations.

#7. It is said that selfish, greedy farmers are getting rich at the expense of the workers.

The latest statistics for the State of California show that farmers receive only 2-3% on their overall investment. At the same time, they are paying the highest wages in the United States for farm labor.

#8. It is stated that up to 800,000 children under the age of 16 are working in the fields. The fact is that there are strict laws regulating child labor in all states. In California, a child under 16 cannot work even part time without a permit. They are not permitted to be out of school.

#9. It is stated that all or most farm workers live in poverty. One church paper printed in Long Island went so far as to say that "The average income of a farmworker family of four is $3,170."

Both the Teamster and U.F.W. contracts bring workers in the grape vineyards of California over $3.00 an hour. There is a base pay of $2.51 in the U.F.W. contract and $2.41 in the Teamster contract. In addition, workers receive pay for considerable piece work that brings the total to over $3.00 an hour. In addition, workers receive 10¢ an hour on a health plan, 10¢ an hour on a pension plan (in the Teamsters). U.F.W. receives 24¢ a box or about 1.5 cents an hour), and Unemployment Insurance (in the Teamsters), social security, workingmen's compensation etc. -- The grower is paying the maximum amount he can at this time and stay in business.

All the above charges have appeared in recent church publications. Such mis-statements and distortion of fact can only damage the church's prestige. Many thousands of farmers have been alienated from their respective congregations. It is my personal experience and that of many pastors I have talked to both Protestant and Catholic that they find it almost impossible to get these people to church. They do not even have their children attend religious instruction, because anti-farmer and pro boycott statements are made a part of class matter. Can we afford to lose so many good people from the church? Are we applying the principles of justice and charity to the farmer as well as to the worker? The farmer sincerely feels that the churches have not said a kind word about him in the past ten years and he has not had a chance to explain his side of the story. I believe that churches have a duty to present a more balanced analysis of the farm picture by:

1. Do not generalize. Don't say that all or even most farmers do this or that injustice. Be specific. #2. Do not print any charges against farmers without giving farm groups a chance to reply to the charges. Print those replies side by side with the charges made.

4. Print the good that farmers do: Say for example, 'The vast majority of farmers are
a section that the doctor has many thousands of years ago. It's a very simple and yet, it's a very complex problem. I think the way to solve it is to define and analyze it. Summarize from a document's stance.
the good that they do along with their abuses—and give them a chance to answer charges made against them. #2. In fair play, we should point out the abuses of the U.F.W., along with their many good points. They too should be given the chance to reply to charges made against them. #3. Support both unions but do so fairly and impartially. Churchmen should not load the deck in favor of one union over the other. -- If defamation and mis-statement continue to be the order of the day with regard to the Teamster, it is hard to see how churchmen will have any constructive influence on that union in the future. They will be alienated from the church and church leaders. As stated before, 90% of Mexican Americans in the vinyards are in that union. Many are very loyal to it...and resent the fact that their union is being maligned. --Churchmen must realize that there has been a drastic change in worker loyalties in the past four years. Whereas in 1970, most workers were loyal to the U.F.W., the same cannot be taken for granted at this time. In 1973, overwhelming numbers of workers signed petitions on almost all ranches of the Coachella Valley saying, "We do not want to be represented by the U.F.W. We do want to be represented by the Teamsters." Only state or federal elections can determine the issue definitively, but there is strong evidence that the abuses of the Chavez union paved the way for the Teamster takeover and that a high percentage of those under Teamster contracts are happy to be in that union.

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I am pastor of Our Lady of Soledad Church. I want it clearly understood, however, that I speak as a private individual exercising his constitutional right to express views that he considers important. I do not write as an official representative of the Church or the Diocese of San Diego. Many churchmen and others have asked me for my views on the subject and I am replying by sending them this position paper for clergymen. Any or all of it may be freely quoted or printed if so desired. If you have any questions, I will try to reply to them as my demanding schedule permits.

Sincerely in Christ,

Rev. Richard Humphrys