

David Havens 1962–1966

Reflections on the Beginning of the Farmworker Organization

It was the 1960s. I was a young minister in Hollister, California, fresh out of seminary with a young family, and I was eager to change the world. I wanted to be a change agent and the times were ripe. As a seminary student, I had been involved in sit-ins at the Kresge dime store lunch counters in Lexington, Kentucky. I sincerely believed that churches should be the leading force in transforming society, righting the wrongs of lunch counters and the rest of the separate and unequal society we lived in. With fire in my belly, I wanted my first pastoral experience to demonstrate this belief.

Hollister Christian Church was a loving congregation and its conscientious members supported most of my wild young ideas, despite the fact that many of the congregants were in their 80s. At one point I decided that our Sunday morning services would create closer fellowship if we took out all the pews and had everyone sit on the floor in a circle while I preached. If there is a purgatory, I'm sure I'll spend a few millennia sitting there for that one. Now that my own knees bend reluctantly, I am embarrassed to think about those dear 80-year-old souls getting down on the floor and spending an hour in torture while I droned on about some concept of Niebuhr or Barth, or whomever I had just read.

This loving congregation, made up mostly of apricot growers, had developed personal relationships with many of the workers who came up from Mexico every year to harvest their fruit. Despite their discomfort in sitting on the floor listening to me, these farmers became deeply disturbed about the problems migrant farmworkers in our community were experiencing. With their growing enthusiasm, we became involved in health, housing, legal, and the countless social problems of migrating families. In our pursuit, we met Dr. Bruce Jessup, Wendy Goepel, Chris Hartmire, and Cesar Chavez. All of these individuals believed that the injustice farmworkers were experiencing in our communities could be solved if we worked hard and stayed focused on the real issues. All of us shared a faith that we could change the system. This faith was based on a belief in ourselves based on a theology that taught us it was our responsibility to attack social injustice wherever we found it lurking, and a belief that the system could and would respond when injustice was exposed. Perhaps it was President Kennedy's leadership that gave us so much hope for change. We knew in our heart of hearts that solving social problems was our responsibility, but more important, we also knew it was achievable if we worked hard enough.

When Chris Hartmire hired me to join the staff of the California Migrant Ministry, I reluctantly left my congregation to become the director of the Kings-Tulare Migrant Ministry. Jim Drake was director of the Goshen Community Service Program (or something like that). He and Susan and their children lived in a small farmworker community just outside of Visalia. They were working on building a community center for farmworkers.

One hot summer day Jim and I were digging trenches for the foundation, sweating profusely. Glancing up, we realized we were working alone. None of the local farmworker residents were helping us with their community center. About once an hour, someone would drop by to see how we were doing, but it was obvious that none of them were sweating in the trench. It gave us pause. What if we quit digging? Did the farmworkers really want this center? How important was this community center to them if they weren't interested enough to work on it?

From these early observations, we developed the concept of "dynamic listening." We realized that the community listened to what we wanted to do and then agreed with us that it was a great idea. Then they provided just enough enthusiasm to keep us going on whatever it was that we wanted to do. It was obvious we had to learn to forget our own preconceptions--e.g., what they really need in this community is a community center--and do some dynamic listening ourselves until we discovered what they cared enough about to actually participate in. We thought we'd discovered a great new truth until a fellow from New York, Bill Kotch, came around with Chris and listened to us describe our great discovery. "You fools," he said, "this has been going on for 20 years in Chicago. Haven't you ever heard of Saul Alinsky?"

I should take time here to explain that both Jim and I had grown up in very traditional middle-class families. We knew little of labor history or social conflicts within America. When I was in college, a small church college in West Virginia, I had a class in labor history taught by the president of Wheeling Steel. It never dawned on me that it might just be a little one-sided. We knew nothing about Alinsky or, as we later learned, about the history and process of social change.

For most of us, our experience with the early civil rights struggles was our first encounter with confrontation. Chris made arrangements with friends in Chicago and off we went to become volunteers with various Alinsky community organizations. We met with Alinsky and listened to his stories of how to bring about social justice.

When we returned, we understood more clearly our role as organizers and proceeded to search for leaders and issues for motivating action. It didn't take long for an issue to surface. A Mexican high-school student had been thrown out of school and subsequently put in jail. We talked to many people about the case, but everyone with whom we spoke just shrugged, saying, "What can we do? That's how it is in this town." It was evident that no one cared enough to act. It was hard, but we waited until they were willing to work--the first lesson in organizing. It happened weeks later when a father overheard his kids talking about the incident. They were upset, afraid, and suddenly he realized how much the situation was affecting his kids. Suddenly it had become personal. He was ready to act. A small group of parents visited the principal. Then the first Mexican school board members were elected. The principal was replaced and the group was rolling.

Our biggest organizing effort became the labor camp rent strike. At about this time, we met with Chris and all of us decided that our efforts at training leaders and building organizations would be strengthened if we became staff of the National Farm Workers Association. Cesar was intent on building NFWA into a strong base with farmworker issues as a first priority. Given the complexities, he felt it would take 10 years of training and building leaders before the NFWA would feel strong enough to take on any major confrontation with growers.

I was speaking in Texas at a National Council of Churches meeting, saying that we were helping to build a farmworkers union but we were not planning any kind of strike until the organization was strong enough to win, and that wouldn't be for at least 10 years. At the end of the speech, I was handed a note to call the office in Delano. Jim answered the phone and said, "Get back here quick. The Filipinos have struck and the rest of the farmworkers want to join them. There's a meeting tonight. Cesar is going to plead with them not to join the strike, but emotions are running high. Some of our key members got thrown off a farm when they complained that the labor contractor was hassling some of the women workers."

I arrived back in Delano to learn the strike vote had been taken by a cheering crowd that ignored Cesar's pleas not to strike. I particularly remember the next morning when there was just Cesar, Dolores Huerta, Gil Padilla, Jim Drake, myself, and one or two others I may have forgotten. I recall just a few of us heading out that first day of the strike. It was dark on our first morning of picketing the farms. I remember Cesar saying that the organization had about \$37 in the bank. Despite the vote to strike, there were many workers in the field. That first morning, we didn't talk anyone out of the fields. There were threats and anger coming from the grower and labor contractor, but Dolores had incredible strength as she spoke to the men in the fields. The second morning a few more workers joined the picket line and as the day progressed, workers came out of the fields and joined the strike.

Many of my memories of the early days of the strike are blurry. Though we spent countless nights sleeping in the office, I often brought people home to sleep on our floor in Visalia. One morning several people were sprawled out on our living room floor in sleeping bags. I recall my two-year-old daughter sitting on top of a very groggy attorney who was trying to answer her persistent questions. "Why are you sleeping on our floor? Are you awake? Will you play with me?" Sleep was hard to come by.

A growing stream of volunteers began joining our struggle. There were attorneys who gave of their time and coordinated legal tactics. There were doctors and nurses who came and set up clinics. Union members came from the cities to support our efforts. Churches joined, bringing new members and funds. I recall one evening when Cesar decided we should picket the home of a labor contractor who lived in Delano. About eight of us armed with picket signs started marching around in front of his home. A local police car pulled up and parked across the street and the policeman watched us. Then two pickups

with local growers pulled up and walked over to the police car. All the while we kept quietly marching in a circle, carrying our signs. The growers leaned over and talked to the policeman, then one of them pulled out a wad of bills, handing them through the window to the policeman. When the police car drove off, the men turned and headed toward us with glares. They shoved one of us and yelled in our faces, trying to provoke us. It was obvious they were getting more and more excited, and the shoving was getting more and more violent. We just continued quietly marching in our circle, but I knew we were about to be badly beaten. It was just a matter of time before they worked themselves into enough anger to start really hurting us. Suddenly they stopped and ran for their pickups. I didn't know what was happening. It was so sudden--one moment we were waiting to be knocked down, and the next we saw the growers running for their lives. I looked around and there on the other side of the street was a crowd of farmworkers. There were Filipinos, Mexicans, Okies, and Arkies. They had materialized from the dark on all sides, forming a circle, slowly closing in. I don't think any words were said, but the growers made their escape quickly. It seemed to me as though hundreds of farmworkers had suddenly appeared to protect us.

We continued to be harassed by growers and their labor contractors and their police. I was arrested for reading Jack London's definition of a strikebreaker. The arresting policeman wanted to arrest the Jack London fellow also, but became resigned when I told him Jack London was dead. We were harassed, but we persisted and grew.

The strike was gaining momentum. Volunteers kept arriving, which soon led to a management nightmare. With the numbers arriving daily, we couldn't get any work done. After we had called for a boycott of grapes, we decided that farmworker volunteers could be used on picket lines and others would be asked to work on the boycott. That seemed the best use of all this caring human energy, but we soon faced another dilemma. Many volunteers wanted to talk about farmworker problems and had little interest in working. They would happily keep Dolores or Cesar or any of us busy all day and night just answering their questions.

Separating the talkers from the doers became a major task. But the doers never ceased to amaze us. Out of desperation we began interviewing volunteers and assigning them tasks. "Will you go to Ohio and organize everyone in the state against buying grapes?" We sent off volunteers across the country on impossible missions. We didn't tell them how they were to accomplish anything. We just assumed that they were committed to the cause and would somehow find the means to do it. And they did. That was the most amazing part of our innocence. Or perhaps ignorance. Volunteers came to Delano to help the farmworkers and accepted the tasks we ask them to fulfill. They went to Ohio, New York, and Kentucky, and organized women in front of grocery stores, at churches, on highways--whatever it took to get the message out to the public. We, in our confusion, lost track of many of them. We didn't know who in Ohio had organized enough power to get the state legislature to pass a bill in support of the farmworkers. Money started pouring in from fundraising events organized by these volunteers. In many cases we had to send out staff to

find these volunteers and discover who they were. They were miracle makers. With no training and little direction, they took off all over America and organized support for the grape strike. The absurdity of youth, perhaps? I think not.

It's been maybe 40 years since the first farmworker strike. Over this time, many of us have worked on other causes. Life has taught us that the one factor that always proves successful is finding individuals who are committed to a cause. You can't train them; you can only spot them and turn them loose. Largely self-selected and self-motivated, they need only to be pointed in the right direction. They will make it happen. Given the right issue, volunteers will come out of the woodwork to meet the challenge and produce results. Later in life I worked within organizations that had the money to hire the best and train the best and support the best with the most sophisticated means, but I never experienced the dynamism brought by committed volunteers. We were young, innocent, and perhaps foolish at times, but we, like the volunteers, were committed enough to a cause to make it happen.