

Wayne “Chris” Hartmire 1962–1989

Support for the Unionization of Farmworkers: Approximately 1961 through 1967

Jane (Pudge) and I and three of our four children (the fourth was born in California) arrived in Los Angeles in mid-September of 1961. It was a major physical and cultural change from our life in East Harlem, New York, and from our hometown of Upper Darby, Pennsylvania.

I was the new director of the California Migrant Ministry, a program of the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of Churches of Christ. (By January of 1965, the CMM received financial support from the NCCC but was administratively the child of the Northern and Southern California Councils of Churches.)

My predecessor, Doug Still, had prepared a list of key people I should meet in the early weeks of my tenure. Although the list was composed almost entirely of church leaders, at the top were the names Cesar Chavez and Fred Ross.

I met Cesar and Fred in a small café in the middle of Latino-populated East Los Angeles. I was very young (29) and looked even younger. My knowledge of California geography, politics, agribusiness, farmworkers, and churches was minimal, at best. I have often wondered what Fred and Cesar thought of this wet-behind-the-ears new kid on the block. My memories of that meeting are vague. We did talk about getting me some exposure to the Community Service Organization (CSO), the Mexican-American civic action organization that Fred brought into being and that Cesar then directed.

We agreed that I would spend the month of November with the Stockton Chapter of the SCO. Gilbert Padilla and Dolores Huerta lived there and staffed the CSO office and chapter.

In the 1950s, Doug Still’s predecessor, Dean Collins, sought and received a grant from the Schwartzhaupt Foundation. The money was to be spent in introducing the staff of the California Migrant Ministry to the world of community organizations. As a result, most staff members of the CMM had spent a month or more traveling with Fred and Cesar as they organized and nurtured rural area chapters of the CSO. My month in Stockton was intended to bring me up to speed.

The CSO, using the techniques of personal visits and house meetings, had chapters in almost every significant Mexican-American barrio in the state. By 1961, the CSO was widely known and respected in California. The Democratic administration of Governor Pat Brown looked to the CSO for Latino candidates for state jobs, commission and board appointments, etc.

CSO chapters worked on all those issues central to the lives of the Mexican-American poor: schools, streetlights, curbs and gutters, jobs, discrimination, and police brutality. The CSO registered tens of thousands of new voters but never endorsed specific candidates. The organization used its clout to impact policies important to the members--no matter the race or party of a particular legislator.

I quickly became a CSO enthusiast. In 1961 and 1962, at Fred and Cesar's invitation, I attended all the statewide CSO board meetings and conventions, including the critical convention in Calexico in mid-March of 1962.

At that convention, Cesar urged the CSO to take on the work of organizing farmworkers. From conversations with him I knew that organizing farmworkers was his personal priority. The rural chapters, composed almost entirely of Mexican-American farmworkers, were 100% supportive of Cesar's proposal. The urban chapters were resistant. They were concerned about competing with the AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. They didn't say it out loud, but they were also concerned that this new direction might get in the way of an increasingly beneficial relationship with the Brown Administration. In 1962, agribusiness was the most powerful industry in the state, and Democrats and Republicans alike were under its influence.

In a split vote, the convention voted down Cesar's farm labor organizing proposal. I remember thinking, "Why doesn't he tell them how important this is to him, personally? Why doesn't he at least hint that a negative vote could cause him to leave the CSO?" I was naïve! Naturally, Cesar wasn't going to blackmail the delegates into voting his way. They had to believe in this new direction if it was to produce any results.

In retrospect, I have also wondered whether Cesar wanted a "yes" vote. How could he do what he wanted to do with a complicated, multi-agenda, and divided institution on his back? Considering the nature and power of the opposition to farm labor organizing and the controversy that ensued after the Delano Grape Strike (September of 1965), it is unlikely that the CSO could have survived such a storm.

In March of 1962, Cesar resigned as director of the CSO. He and Helen and their eight children moved to a small house in Delano--a community that included close friends and many of Helen's relatives. Helen and the older children worked in the fields when they could and Cesar began to organize the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

I visited the Chavez family whenever I drove up Highway 99, which passed through Delano. Cesar and Helen attended several California Migrant Ministry retreats to bring us up to date on their family and on the progress of the NFWA. In 1962, I assigned a new CMM staff person, Jim Drake, to travel with Cesar and learn the ropes of organizing. Jim's CMM car and gasoline credit card supported much of Cesar's travel. At this same time, we gave the NFWA an old CMM mimeograph machine. The NFWA had no dues in those

early months and thus, no money. The Chavez family had only the money Helen and the older children could earn in the fields, plus their very limited savings.

The CMM sponsored or supported a variety of programs in the major agricultural valleys. These programs included mission churches, community centers, community organizing, county migrant ministries focused on organizing church people to reach out to migrants in their communities, and an extensive summer program staffed by college and seminary students. We had projects in 13 counties, including Kern and Tulare, which became the focus of the Delano Grape Strike in 1965. The CMM staff included 15 persons supported by their denominations' mission budgets and six of us who were on the CMM payroll.

During this same period (early 1960s), the NCCC and the CMM were actively opposing PL 78, the "bracero program. This program began during World War II, when there was a shortage of American workers, and it was continued year after year because of the power of agribusiness.

Mexican braceros ("strong arms") were brought into major agricultural areas during the peak of the harvest to do farm labor. The agricultural industry claimed that Mexican laborers were needed—and that if the program ended, crops would rot in the fields. Migrant Ministry staff in the fields saw a different story: growers preferred braceros because they were cheap and they were completely in the control of their employers. Domestic workers were displaced and left without work because of this preference. Labor organizers and labor actions were undermined by the use of a captive bracero labor force. Enforcement of the so-called "contract" that was designed to protect braceros and domestic workers was limited and often nonexistent. The result: braceros were cruelly exploited and domestic workers lost jobs.

While I was at seminary in 1959, Pudge and I worked as summer CMM volunteers. During that summer we learned the human details of the bracero program. Doug Still was a well-informed, articulate opponent of this program. He led all of us in learning about the consequences of PL 78.

When I arrived in 1961, I was meant to be the "new Doug Still," the focal point for the church's opposition to the bracero program in California. Fortunately, I learned more in my CSO month in Stockton because the San Joaquin County tomato industry was dominated by bracero labor in the summer and fall. But I was only partially prepared for the controversy that grew in size and intensity until PL 78 was finally terminated at the end of 1964.

In my first six months, I was called upon to testify as a representative of the NCCC at congressional hearings held in California. I toured the state with Dr. Shirley Greene of the NCCC, speaking with rural church folks—most of them growers—who angrily opposed our position on PL 78. It was an eye-opening, and sometimes frightening, experience.

These growers were angry because they loved their church and could not understand why the NCCC would take a position that they believed would hurt them. The leaders of agribusiness were angry because the Migrant Ministry was one of the few knowledgeable and objective groups opposing the bracero program. The NCCC's position was based on decades of experience in the fields. The NCCC and the CMM had nothing to gain from this position. In fact, the opposite was true because church members were threatening to withdraw their support of all Council of Churches programs because of the bracero issue.

The CMM staff was united on this issue. The labor movement strongly opposed PL 78. Fred and Cesar and the CSO were informed and determined opponents of the bracero program. We had powerful opponents, but also considerable support in this long campaign to end the bracero program. And it did end—on December 31, 1964—nine months before the Delano Grape Strike.

The PL 78 struggle helped prepare me for the raging controversy that was to come. I began to get used to the idea that some people not only didn't like me, but considered me to be a dangerously misguided enemy. It was a hard but necessary lesson. Most of us who train for the ministry expect to be liked, even loved. We tend to avoid conflict and back away from situations that could cause another party to dislike or resent us. I was thrown into the bracero fight and had to learn to cope. It was excellent preparation for the years ahead.

As 1965 got under way, the CMM had become a program of the California Council of Churches. The bracero program was dead, at last. We had all learned something about community organizing and the power it put into the hands of very poor people. Most of us hoped for the day that migrant and seasonal farmworkers would organize a union of their own so they could negotiate as equals with their employers to gain decent wages and working conditions.

When Cesar Chavez and the NFWA joined the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in the Delano Grape Strike in early September of 1965, we were there, in the fields. We knew firsthand the reality of farm labor and we all yearned for a better day for farmworkers and their children. We were as prepared as we could be, but nothing in our lives prepared us for the storm that was coming. When Cesar asked for help with the strike, we said "yes." Fortunately, we did not know what that simple word would mean for the Migrant Ministry and for each of us in the years ahead.

California Migrant Ministry "support" for the Delano Grape Strike included the following actions:

- Assigning CMM staff Jim Drake and Gil Padilla (full-time) and Dave Havens (part-time) to assist the NFWA and the strikers.

- Urging other staff to join the picket lines whenever possible.

- Organizing food caravans from Northern and Southern California churches to Delano.

- Raising money to help pay the costs of the strike (e.g., gasoline for strikers' cars).

- Inviting state and national church leaders to visit Delano to see for themselves the reality of the strike.

- Encouraging visiting church leaders to speak to the growers and the public about the need for negotiations as a way of resolving the strike.

- Enlisting clergy and laity to go to jail with the strikers to make visible the local sheriff's arbitrary restrictions on free speech.

- Spreading word of the strike and the demands of the workers throughout the religious community.

The growers were quickly aware of the presence of Migrant Ministry staff on the picket lines. At first it annoyed them, but as time went on they saw the danger to their cause represented by church involvement on the side of the workers. The growers then mounted a vigorous campaign to discredit the Migrant Ministry and eliminate our funding.

Why did it matter to them? We were a very small part of the church's life, with an annual budget that barely exceeded \$100,000. Compared to the resources of agribusiness, the California Migrant Ministry was like a fly on an elephant's back. But as time would tell, that fly had a way of getting its message out to many, many others.

Farm labor strikes in the past had been contained locally and crushed locally. The growers controlled all local institutions—including churches—and could count on their support.

Cesar Chavez and the NFWA had no intention of being isolated and crushed in Delano. The presence of the CMM and our supporters was part of a campaign to make the strike visible—in the state and, eventually, throughout the nation. When church people visited the picket line and/or brought food to the strikers, they went home to tell their stories and to enlist others to return to Delano. Church leaders spoke to workers and growers and then publicly called for negotiations between the parties. When clergy and laity went to jail with the strikers in October of 1965, the story reached the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Sacramento Bee*, and San Francisco's *Chronicle* and *Examiner* newspapers. The *Los Angeles Times* eventually editorialized against the CMM's support for the strikers, saying, "The church should not take sides."

The presence of the CMM and church supporters weakened most of the growers' public claims about the strike, which included:

- “There is no strike.” Men and women from the churches with an axe to grind kept coming week after week to see the strike and announce its reality.

- “Our workers are happy; they are being manipulated by outside agitators.” Church people not only joined the picket line, but also talked to the strikers about job conditions and heard their reasons for making the risky decision to walk out of the fields.

- “Cesar Chavez is a communist; his only concern is ideology and violent revolution.” Cesar spoke to almost all church groups coming to Delano. They saw and heard for themselves the depth of his faith-based commitment to justice and nonviolence.

- “We are local and we know the true situation. Our ministers are local and they also know the truth and support us.” This was the time of the civil rights movement. Many church leaders—state and national—had been to Selma, Jackson, and Birmingham. They had heard the “local—we know best” argument all over the South and it was no longer persuasive to them.

Moderate church leaders, unwilling to "take sides" by supporting the strike, called for negotiations between the parties. The workers' leadership said “yes” to negotiations, but the growers said “no.” The flat refusal of agribusiness to talk to their organized workers persuaded many church people to join the farmworkers' cause.

As word about the strike spread throughout the state, the growers increased their attacks on the CMM. Slowly but surely, farmers discovered that their own, beloved local (Protestant) church was sending money to the state denominational headquarters. Some of this money went to the Council of Churches, and some ended up with the California Migrant Ministry. The farmers were shocked, then furious.

In time, the growers came to realize that the involvement of the churches was a major problem. As described above, much of their propaganda was weakened or discredited by the presence of the CMM and an increasing number of church members and leaders. And church people were spreading the news of the grape strike!

The agricultural industry fought back by trying to discredit the staff of the CMM and by urging the mainline denominations to withdraw their support of the CMM. It was widely circulated in grower circles that the Rev. David Havens had used a curse word in a talk to a local church. In a similar vein, the Rev. Jim Drake's station wagon was observed with empty beer cans scattered about. These stories, though frivolous, helped to convince many people in agricultural valleys that we were immoral and reckless outsiders who were “just the kind of people you would expect to be supporting Chavez.”

The bigger threat to the CMM came from within each denomination. With rare exceptions, every local church in every agricultural valley passed a resolution condemning the presence of the CMM in Delano and urging their own denomination to withdraw from

the Northern and Southern California Councils of Churches, or in some way eliminate funding to the CMM. For nearly two years, this controversy raged within each denomination affiliated with Northern and Southern California Councils of Churches.

During those two years I spoke to dozens of church groups all over California. Some of the gatherings were friendly; many were not. Meetings that would have assembled 20 to 30 migrant ministry supporters in 1964 drew crowds in the hundreds during 1965 and 1966. In that process I learned a hard lesson: Don't moderate the message for the many who oppose us. Instead, speak clearly and forcefully to the few who are with us. Give them the information they need, the biblical underpinnings for our work and, hopefully, the spiritual energy to continue their own brave local support for the cause.

Cesar and I were invited to a church in Visalia to debate the head of the California Farm Bureau and an economist from Berkeley. The very large church was full, and loudspeakers were set up outside for another 200 to 300 people. As we walked in through the murmuring crowd, Cesar whispered to me "Chris, they are angrier at you than they are at me." That may have been an exaggeration, but there is no doubt that we in the CMM were perceived as turncoats and traitors—white ministers who were betraying all that "the white church" should stand for.

The CMM survived! Initially, we lost financial support because of the mass defection of rural churches. But, in time, our support broadened and grew. We won almost all key votes in state denominational bodies (judicatories) for these primary reasons:

- The Northern and Southern California judicatories were composed of both rural and urban churches. The urban churches were larger and sent more delegates to church assemblies (synods, conferences, conventions, dioceses, etc.).

- CMM staff members were known personally to denominational leaders and to many church members. Stories about our "immoral" behavior backfired on the growers. We were known to be knowledgeable and serious--perhaps a bit young and zealous--but serious Christians committed to justice for farmworkers.

- With only a few exceptions, the leaders of statewide denominational bodies were tireless, skilled, and courageous in their defense of the Migrant Ministry's presence in Delano. They traveled throughout their jurisdictions, listening and interpreting.

- Overworked and often abused, denominational leaders stuck to their support for the CMM and for the farmworkers' cause. They did this work without the compensatory benefits that we enjoyed—direct involvement in the farmworkers' struggle with all of its new and hopeful spiritual energy.

- It is very hard for the church-in-assembly to say "no" to a poor people's struggle for justice when the issue is presented clearly and directly.

- The growers sought to shift the focus away from the fundamental justice issue by pointing to our behavior, our “outsider ignorance,” and our misguided decision to “take sides” in a very complex socioeconomic struggle.

- The growers won delays and verbal compromises, but in the end most denominations in California stayed with the CMM.

The controversy within the churches eventually spread beyond California to all regions of the country where the grape boycott was active. The struggle within the church was sometimes frustrating, occasionally painful, and always tiring. It also had great value. The deeper and more widespread the controversy, the more people came to know of the farmworkers’ cause in California. A church struggle that at first seemed to be a threat to the existence of the CMM turned out to be a great benefit to the cause of the Delano strikers and boycotters. As more and more Christians debated the issues and took sides, more and more people became involved in the simple act of refusing to eat table grapes. By 1969, 17 million Americans were boycotting California table grapes. The hard-won grape contracts of 1970 were the result of the leadership and courage of the grape strikers coupled with the massive support from churches, church people, and the public at large.

The National Farmworker Ministry and the Farmworkers’ Movement: Some Things We Have Learned

(Written for “75 Years National Farm Worker Ministry, 1920 – 1995”)

Since 1962, the California Migrant Ministry and its successor, the National Farm Worker Ministry, have accompanied farmworkers in a long, difficult struggle for self-determination and justice. It began with Cesar Chavez and the NFWA in California, but a similar relationship has developed with Baldemar Velasquez and FLOC. Our history with the farmworker movement is in some ways unique, but the lessons we learned may be helpful in other places and times, as the church attempts to be with poor people in their organized quest for justice.

The Migrant Ministry was there in the fields with the farmworkers and their families, year after year, in every significant agricultural valley in the country. The churches had been supporting the Migrant Ministry and hearing of its work for decades. We were a “much beloved but mostly ignored” mission activity of the mainline Protestant denominations through the National Council of Churches, state and local councils of churches, and state and local migrant ministries committees.

This historical connection to the churches and the human relationships it involved were important factors in the Migrant Ministry’s survival and usefulness in the 1960s, when the Delano Grape Strike emerged as a major issue for Christians and their institutions. The

California Migrant Ministry went to Delano to support the strikers, and in response, the growers sought to discredit us in any way they could (“young leftist ministers,” “trained by Saul Alinsky,” “with beer cans in the backs of their cars,” “who swear in public,” etc., etc.). But church people and church leaders already knew us as real, live human beings with everyday experience in the field and a serious, personal commitment to farmworkers and their children. Church people didn’t always agree with us, but they had to take us seriously.

It also helped immensely that the Grape Strike hit in September 1965 in the context of the civil rights movement. Many clergy had been to Selma, or had heard reports from civil rights workers in the South. They knew that local institutions (churches, police, media, and politicians) might side with the existing power structure, even if the cause of the poor was just. They knew that the Migrant Ministry’s unpopular position on the picket line in Delano might just be the right place for Christianity to be. At a minimum, most church leaders in California were willing to listen to our pleas and our arguments on behalf of the farmworkers’ cause.

None of these factors lessened the raging controversy that swept through every mainline Protestant denomination after it was discovered that the Migrant Ministry was supporting a disruptive strike in Delano, but they did enable us to tell our story, point to our personal experience in the fields with farmworkers, and argue the cause of justice. In the end, the California Migrant Ministry not only survived but grew in strength, and in time helped to give birth to the National Farm Worker Ministry.

Some lessons we learned:

- It was important that we were clear about the secondary nature of our role. We were with farmworkers as supporters. We were not responsible for the policy and direction of the farmworkers’ union. We responded to their strategy and their expressed needs. But we were very helpful as supporters and as a link between the realities and needs of the farmworkers’ struggle and the wider church that was not as close to that reality as we were.

- Our usefulness as supporters depended on the existence of a viable farmworkers’ union that had clear goals and strong leadership, wanted a collaborative relationship with us, and wanted public support from the churches. Prior to 1962, many in the Migrant Ministry knew that farmworkers needed a union of their own, but we were powerless and frustrated because there was no such organization.

- It turned out to be more valuable to send our own staff to be with the farmworkers’ movement than to send money for their programs. For one thing, it was the only way to know for sure what was going on and what was needed in a fast-moving social struggle. But more important, sending good people with common sense and strong values is probably the best way to be helpful to a poor people’s movement. For much of its life, the CMM/NFWM had more than half of its staff working at tasks within the UFW—at the union’s headquarters, on the boycott, and in field offices. In the early days of the Delano

strike, Jim Drake was my lifeline to the day-to-day events of the strike and boycott because he was in Delano and was a CMM staff person. (Even when he was too busy to talk, he talked to me—I signed his paycheck.) It needs to be emphasized that this vital way of being present with and supporting farmworkers depended on the willingness of the union's leadership to accept the strengths and limitations of having NFWM staff working side-by-side with union staff.

- Because we were a child of the church, our commitment to the farmworkers' strike and boycott pulled the entire institution into the battle and helped many church people learn about the farmworkers' cause. Many church leaders heroically supported the Migrant Ministry and spent untold hours—even days—interpreting our work to a questioning and sometimes angry constituency. Even those leaders who hoped we would go away had to acknowledge that their denominations supported the Migrant Ministry through the Council of Churches.

- It is hard for the church, when it gathers in assembly, to vote “no” on an issue of justice for the poor. It was therefore imperative that we keep the debate focused on that central point. Our opponents wanted to discuss our behavior, our use of funds, our lines of communication, and our private lives. If they had found a believable personal or administrative issue, they may well have been able to shift the debate away from the crucial justice issue.

- From the start, the NFWM was clear about its mission to be present with and support farmworkers as they organized to achieve dignity, freedom, and justice. We invited church groups to join in that endeavor. We did not invite them to join in a debate about whether it was the right course. This clarity of purpose and the visible, practical, and cost-effective nature of our work encouraged commitment and support from our friends. Many thousands of church people started by hearing about the farmworkers' cause and ended up on picket lines in the fields, leafleting in supermarket parking lots, praying at displays of grapes inside stores, fasting for justice, and even going to jail when the need arose.

It has been argued that we were too close to the UFW and its leadership, that over time we lost our objectivity and our independent moral judgment. Our uncertain and occasionally confused response to Cesar's trip to the Philippines in 1977 is cited as an example of the price we paid for our closeness. It is probably true that we paid a moral price for our close working relationship with the farmworkers' movement. We tried, always, to speak the truth to the churches, even when that truth raised questions about the tactics of the UFW. We did not always tell the whole truth. We left out some of what we knew about the daily battle in the fields and on the boycott for the sake of putting the union's best foot forward.

In retrospect, there are things I would have done differently. But I firmly believe that we did the right thing in joining ourselves and our institution to the farmworkers' union. At times it caused us to compromise ourselves, but I believe that, in Bonhoeffer's terms, it was the way “to be fully responsible” in the world that we were given. From our position

alongside the people of the UFW, we were able to experience the depths of their sacrifice, understand the reasons behind their strategies, and know firsthand what they needed not only to survive but also to move forward. Because we were there, we were able to be useful and to call on others to do things that were useful. Because we represented an important support system, we were also influential. The union's decisions were, in part, influenced by the fact that they knew that the churches had been supportive in the past and could be supportive in the future.

Looking back on those early years of the UFW struggle, there is much to be thankful for. It was a wonderful accident of history that the CMM was there in the fields, at the right place and the right time. But it is also true that the churches and church people came through in a way that helped change the course of history for farmworkers and their children.