

## Gene Boutilier 1966–1971, 1974, 1976

My wife, Luana Boutilier, and I moved to Fresno in 1963. I was the staff minister of a United Church of Christ congregation, specializing in Christian education. It was my first parish after seminary in Berkeley. My wife and I were urban people, at least two generations removed from farm life, and without any direct links to farm labor. The more than 1500 parishioners were mostly professionals, business and civic leaders, and educators. Few were low income, fewer still not Anglo. I was “organizer” to more than 80 volunteers in the education program each semester, and regionally very active in camping, youth and student work, and teacher training. For balance, I had extensive involvement in community work dealing with poverty, race relations, fair housing, international affairs and peace activism, interfaith action, and mental health projects. My counseling and pastoral work included lots of contact with students not affiliated with the church, as well as the church families. I was very content with this intense life.

My wife, Luana, and I had a growing young family (see our daughter Karen Kendall’s contribution to this collection), and Luana had begun periodic episodes of brain disorders and mental illness that meant long hospitalizations and recoveries—interspersed with periods of great productivity, creativity, and activist involvement—for the next 40 years. She was in an “up” mode in 1965 and 1966, teaching fifth grade in rural west Fresno County in a tiny district in which the Board of Education and a few families were grower management and most of the kids were from farm labor and laborer families, and usually workers in the fields themselves. She was very close to the kids, learned a lot from them and their families, and had regular conflicts with management.

I was one of two Central Valley members of a regional “conference” denominational committee supporting the “rural fringe” work of Jim Drake in Goshen for the California Migrant Ministry. The project was funded with national and regional UCC funding. Our UCC committee was one of the many channels being mobilized and molded by the Migrant Ministry, led by Chris Hartmire and before him Doug Still, deep in its strategic and intentional transition from its past to its future.

The ministry’s past consisted of decades of seasonal efforts to make the labor camps and farm towns more hospitable and tolerable for migrants by providing various spiritual and material human services to them. Along with that work was a history of church efforts to promote government protections and health, safety, and worker law enforcement. The present was self-help and organizing community development where farmworkers, often ex-migrants, lived. The goal and future was to provide extensive church support for farmworker union organizing, plus ongoing support for community development.

Urban and civil rights activists in the churches—people with a history of social gospel and justice action and a history of relating to labor unions in other settings—adjusted to this transition easily, and helped it happen. Given the times, the transition seemed natural, overdue, logical, and reasonable.

But in the 1960s, this and other social movements triggered massive opposition reactions. Just as agricultural workers had to choose which side they were on, the transition polarized a number of congregations, their denominations, and councils of churches, and set friends and families at odds with each other wherever growers had influence. Luana and I joined some demonstrations, starting with the protests against rent increases and awful living conditions in the county housing authority–owned farm labor camps in Woodville. When clergy were arrested for picket-line action at the beginning of the Delano strike, I avoided arrest, but was present, supportive, and talked about the issues in the congregation afterward.

The majority of the congregation, many of whom were committed to civil rights, anti-poverty work, fair housing, and other social causes, were supportive. Some were very pleased to be identified with the activism. But those whose economic or social or, especially, political well-being required approval from agribusiness organized to eliminate the trouble. In her book on the Migrant Ministry, Pat Hoffman briefly tells a story about my departure from the congregation. Here is my short version.

Bill Johnson, the Mississippi-reared church moderator, was an excellent parent, a great supporter of the church, a lawyer with business clients, and someone with personal citrus holdings. He was a very active church person with a clear-eyed view of the situation. At a meeting in the social hall about my activities, a member said, “If Jesus were alive, he wouldn’t be down there (in Delano) picketing with those trouble-makers and communists.” Bill, who was chairing the meeting, said, “No, you are wrong. I believe that if Jesus were alive, that is exactly what he would be doing, but I would not be helping to pay his salary.” I deeply appreciated Bill’s integrity, and the committee’s, and it became very clear that I had to leave as soon as the work allowed.

Easter Sunday of 1966 was our last Sunday. The family stayed in Fresno to finish Luana’s work year. I was taken into the Migrant Ministry staff to work for the union.

My first assignment was the first Student Summer Project, a national recruiting of activist students to come work for the union that June. SNCC, SDS, and religious student movement groups cosponsored the project. We screened and selected and gathered more than 70 full-time activists to the Forty Acres in Delano for an intense orientation week and assignment. Some who joined us then stayed on for years and are among the contributors to this collection. I did a lot of phoning and mailings, and traveled to California campuses. (My first 52 weeks with the union put 54,000 miles on our van, which was passed on to Teatro Campesino when we moved to Washington, D.C.)

The second of my assignments was to coordinate support in the San Francisco Bay Area. A big Huelga Day march was planned for San Francisco’s Market Street in a couple of weeks, with lots of civic and big labor support, especially the ILWU longshoreman workers. But some supporters had divided into two squabbling camps—politically left active boycotters

and a group of Catholic cadre with more conservative Latino leadership. They had fallen into the traps of red-baiting and attacking the churchiness of each other. The conflict had been picked up in the press (twice in Herb Caen's *San Francisco Chronicle* column) and the march was in jeopardy. The assignment was to replace the leaders of both factions, keep their supporters, pull off the march, and intensify the boycott activity. It happened.

My third assignment was to organize a car-and-truck caravan from the Bay Area to Delano to attend a big support rally and bring food and other supplies. Highway 99 was renamed Huelga Highway and was plastered with colorful road signs of doubtful legality. The period of some Teamsters being used as a company-friendly union was under way, so we were proud of the Teamster-driven 18-wheeler that led our caravan and was full of groceries for the strikers. I warned my family to bring "a change of clothing or two just in case." Of course we were reassigned and never got back to the Bay Area, where some of our possessions and household goods made their way into other hands.

The fourth assignment was to go to El Paso and Juarez to help Gil Padilla find former DiGiorgio Company workers who were eligible to vote in the Coachella Valley or Delano in a union representation election, and convince them and assist them to travel nearly 2000 miles to vote. For two weeks in late August we stayed in an unfurnished room in El Paso and found the voters, most of whom lived in the Colonias without house numbers on poorly defined streets. They had not always correctly identified their location on their payroll records. I made the round trip across the desert three times with vanloads of voters. One worker told of Pancho Villa riding horseback from Mexico City all the way to Juarez to vote in an important municipal election. On his return from California, the worker proclaimed that he had now done the same! Our hassles with the border were not unusual for the workers, but were very new to us. We of course carried no papers for our children, including our young Mexican-American nephew, Mark, who lived with us then. One interrogator demanded to know if we were "illegally importing Mexican children."

Assignment #5 was spending the next four months in Delano doing administrative work for the union and directing the focused boycott of the Perelli-Minetti Wine Company and other boycotts in that interim period. During that period we worked with friends in the railroading unions. Tanker cars of bulk wines sometimes ended up at odd unintended destinations. Kosher wine and various brandy companies that were the destinations of the Perelli-Minetti bulk wine shipments reacted to publicity and extensive correspondence and visits as their brands were associated with the boycotted bulk products.

One night at harvest peak, 100 boycott support pickets emerged at exactly 11 p.m. at all entrances to the main Central Valley railroad yards in Fresno, where I still had many friends. Evening shift railroad workers had all left on time, so they could not be held over by management in the "emergency." Night workers had carefully not come early, all honored the line, nothing moved, the news media loved the story, the company lawyers spent all night getting injunctions. The next morning the picketers disappeared and the injunctions had no effect, but the shipping schedule was in chaos for days.

In January of 1967, we were given our sixth assignment from the union: Move to Washington, D.C. to create and direct the national campaign for agricultural democracy to get the National Labor Relations Act extended to agriculture. (The definition of an “employee” in the 1935 Wagner Act and its later amendments included the words “except agricultural employees.”) I wore a clerical collar with a gray work shirt every day to symbolize the strong support for our campaign from the National Council of Churches, the U.S. Catholic Conference, and many other religious groups. I wanted to emphasize that I was not exactly a “labor lobbyist,” even though labor strongly supported our campaign. The bills had prominent sponsors. We had hearings and field hearings, rallies, a long list of supporters, and a truly national campaign for passage, and moved the bills out of the initial committees. However, in the turmoil of the 1968 election year chaos, the bills died, as had our heroes Martin Luther King, Jr., and presidential candidate, Bobby Kennedy. Nixon was elected.

Shortly after Nixon’s victory, the UFW executive committee decided that extending federal labor act legislation to farmworkers would not help us organize because the federal law already had inadequate remedies when employers defied the law. Republican appointees to the National Labor Relations Board would weaken rather than strengthen unions. This was a painful but wise decision, proven correct by the labor history of recent decades. The union leadership shifted to a campaign for a California state farm labor-organizing law. But the union leadership, which for good reasons distrusted “Washington” in general, including some of the national union and Democratic Party leadership, went beyond opposing continued efforts to pass NLRA for agriculture to say they had always opposed it. This was very painful to me and to the many supporters of the legislation, including the friends of labor in Congress.

Our seventh assignment, which continued for the next two-and-a-half years, was to close out the campaign, protect us from bad legislation in a watchdog role, and to act as boycott and support coordinator for the Washington region. We lived in a boycott house with as many as 15 other volunteers and boycott staff, with hundreds of extra visitors during the big peace demonstrations. As we campaigned, the official USDA daily market survey proved our effectiveness by reporting a 70 cents price differential per case for “preferred” over “nonpreferred” wholesale grapes in the D.C. market. In those days, that was the profit margin, and “preferred” was their code word for union-label grapes. We collected samples of California table grapes for lab testing and publicized dangerous and illegal levels of pesticide residue.

I spent one birthday in the Alexandria, Virginia, jail successfully defending our right to picket a Safeway. We were arrested in front of the White House protesting the California grapes served by Nixon in the dessert at a state dinner. At times during our Washington years, Luana spent time in California, helping Doug Adair with *El Malcriado* and doing other work for the union.

Our opponents in the food industry were more powerful than the president! Carl Bernstein, later famous for his Watergate coverage, wrote a great feature piece on the boycott that appeared on the front page of the metropolitan section of the *Washington Post*. It had pictures of well-known clergy conducting a prayer service at an altar on a mall directly over the grape counter of a Safeway a floor below. I learned later from Frank Porter, then labor editor of the newspaper, that the major grocers met with Katharine Graham, the *Post's* publisher, and asked her how many pages of advertising a week the farmworker union bought compared to them. The executive editor, Ben Bradlee, circulated a confidential memo at Graham's request, stating that the coverage of the boycott was excessive. For a long time after, we could not get an inch of coverage. Cesar filled the hall for an event at the Washington National Cathedral with many members of Congress in attendance, and it was mentioned in about five words in the middle of a story about another event. Several substantive stories about us were later written by reporters and edited but not published. They stood up to Nixon heroically, but grocers buy many double pages of ads every week.

During the Washington years, we also supported civil rights, anti-poverty, and peace work, and played active staff roles in the Viva Humphrey-Muskie campaign in the fall of 1968 and of course in the RFK campaign prior to his death.

In the summer of 1971, we relocated to Wisconsin and spent the next five years there in an urban ministry. I was an officer of the National Farm Worker Ministry and chaired the state Migrant Ministry. We worked especially hard on the Guild Brandy boycott because Wisconsin led the nation by far in per-capita brandy consumption.

Luana had the longest jury trial for a minor misdemeanor in the history of Racine, Wisconsin, winning her argument that four police officers were lying when they accused her of blocking windshields of drivers with her picket sign in a liquor store parking lot (with the wind-chill temperature minus 23 degrees.)

Luana returned to California in 1972 for the eighth assignment, the No on 22 initiative, working in San Mateo County. Our whole family returned to Los Angeles on Labor Day of 1976, for our ninth assignment—staffing the Farmworkers' Initiative Campaign in south-central Los Angeles that fall. We lived in an abandoned Catholic school building with perhaps 100 workers from the fields, and campaigned intensively but unsuccessfully for the right kind of labor law.

Many of Luana's art pieces have themes from her love for the farmworker movement, and can be found in a memorial to her at [www.luanaart.net](http://www.luanaart.net). I continue to support the union as a member of the National Farm Worker Ministry board. I thank God for the meaning in life that this experience has provided to all of us who, in our various ways, have responded to the social justice struggle for worker rights.

