

Pat Hoffman, “Ministry of the Dispossessed”

Foreword

By Cesar Chavez

Way back in the beginning of our Union, someone asked what we expected from the Church. I answered that we did not want more churches or cathedrals; rather, we wanted the Church to be present with us, beside us, willing to sacrifice for justice, ready to be Christ among us.

At the time, I wasn't thinking about how much the farm workers in the union—the strikers and the boycotters—were themselves the Church-in-the-world, showing the way for many Christians who yearned for a better world. We were not, of course, trying to make a theological statement. We were just doing what we had to do for the sake of a measure of justice in the fields. And, as it turned out, many thousands of people from the churches joined us along the way.

The Migrant Ministry led from the beginning. They were beside us with support and with their lives. I am sure they had their anxious moments, but it did not keep them from throwing themselves into the middle of our fight. And from that position alongside us, they pulled significant parts of the non-farm worker Church into our movement.

Pat Hoffman has done a remarkable job of telling the story of the Church's involvement with the farm workers union. Even more importantly, she has demonstrated through the experiences of individuals, how participation in the UFW struggle challenged people's values and priorities, shaped their understanding of social change and led them in directions that truly changed their lives.

These determined farm worker supporters then affected the priorities of the Church by forcing the agenda of the poor into meetings and assemblies and public worship in ways that most of us in the Union did not fully appreciate at the time.

The challenge of the Union's struggle also changed the lives of farm workers, forcing them to make hard decisions about their basic economic security and placing the issues of justice and future hope for their children, in the center of family life.

Many workers and spouses and children made sacrifices for their cause that are still an inspiration: going on strike with little or no resources in reserve, and traveling to strange, cold, far-away cities to tell the story of the strike and boycott to any person or any group who would listen. In almost every case, those sacrifices for justice brought remarkable human growth, a deepening of religious faith, and an unshakeable confidence in the unifying power of non-violent struggle.

As the churches face new challenges and controversies in communities of the poor all over the world, it would be wise to reflect on the lessons learned by the Migrant Ministry's

pilgrimage in the fields. I know what farm workers will never forget the people who stood with us in those darkest days when no one believed that a farm worker's union could survive and actually bring about change. And it is also hard to forget those others who turned their backs on us when the need was greatest.

Our struggle for justice in the fields continues. The poor in many places call on the Church to risk comfort and privilege for the sake of God's peace and justice. Pat Hoffman's book is not only clear and readable and historically important, it also points the way for the Church to learn from the poor and to gain spiritual life and strength from the movements of the dispossessed.

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