

Embedded in the Farmworkers Movement --
I Wish I Knew Then What I Know Now
October 6, 2004

-- Chris Hartmire

I chose this title because I was urged to be personal in my remarks today! The second part means “I have regrets,” which I will discuss later. “Embedded” is a good word for my situation. The dictionary defines it as “to set or fix firmly in a surrounding mass.” I am not a farmworker, but circumstances caused me to be embedded, to be fixed firmly within the farmworkers movement.

Now something about my personal background: I grew up in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, a western suburb of Philadelphia. I have an older sister, Anne, and a younger brother, John. To most people we seemed like a normal, church-going, middle-class family.

But my father was unsuccessful and frustrated at work and unhappy at home. For complicated reasons that I will skip, he was emotionally absent from our home for much of our growing-up years, but he did introduce me to baseball, and for that I am truly grateful.

My mother was a lovely, intelligent woman. Her painful, unstable childhood left her with too little self confidence; my father’s emotional absence only increased her insecurity. My mother was also a faithful, sensitive, loving Mom -- with a big open heart for each of us, for our friends, and for all the underdogs of the world. No one who came to our door for help was ever turned away. And when the “dreaded Catholics” started moving into our neighborhood, my mother was the first to welcome them. My father was not as openhearted toward those who were different.

In 1961, when our Freedom Ride made the local Philadelphia and Upper Darby papers, my mother was interviewed. (Fortunately for him, my father had died four years earlier.) The interview showed two sides of my mother's complicated personality. In her heart of hearts she was very proud of me, but she was also acutely aware of the opinions of others, including her friends. The headline for her article read, "Mother Says Freedom Rider Is No Show-Off." I love it and cherish it still!

I clearly inherited my mother's insecurity and her identification with the underdogs of our society. The latter is not so much a virtue as a reflection of who we are: we felt like underdogs -- so naturally we identified with other underdogs.

I went to Princeton -- on a scholarship -- to become a civil engineer, but it didn't turn out that way. For two summers I worked in Princeton's undergraduate-run summer camp for low-income boys from New York City, Newark, Trenton, Philadelphia, and Princeton. Something clicked in my spirit or psyche (or both), and I changed direction. Having been raised in the church (the former United Presbyterian Church of North America), I concluded that I could best serve the poor by entering the ministry. I graduated from Princeton as a civil engineer but with plans to go to seminary.

Jane, "Pudge," my friend from the 7th grade, and I were married in December 1954. I spent three years in the Navy Civil Engineering Corps as the transportation officer for the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, while Pudge worked as a public health nurse in Philadelphia's poorest communities.

In 1957 we went off to Union Seminary in NYC. All during seminary -- with the exception of one important summer -- I

worked with young people in the East Harlem Protestant Parish (EHPP). It seemed natural to join the parish after graduation from Union. Pudge had intelligent, common-sense reservations, but she supported my sense of call. In June 1960 we moved to the 14th floor of a low-income housing project in East Harlem, and I went to work as minister to youth for the Church of Resurrection, one of the four churches of the parish.

A year later, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) asked the EHPP to send one white minister on an interracial, interfaith Freedom Ride through the South. We drew straws and I got the long (or short) straw, which is how I ended up on a Freedom Ride that took us to Tallahassee, Florida and to jail (another long story!).

In the summer of 1959, while in seminary, we had driven to California and lived in my uncle's home in Palo Alto, as I worked in the summer program of the Santa Clara County Migrant Ministry -- part of the California Migrant Ministry. The director of the California Migrant Ministry, Doug Still, was leaving, and he came after me to be his successor. Since the California Migrant Ministry was at that time a program of the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC), Jon Regier, Edith Lowry, and Bill Scholes also came calling.

I was leery about taking on what seemed to me to be this administrative job in a far-off state. To make a long story short, I accepted the position as director of the CMM, and we headed west in the fall of 1961 -- telling our mothers we would be back in five years.

I was a very reluctant dragon...driving into L.A. on the San Bernardino Freeway, seeing all those closely spaced pastel-colored box houses almost caused me to turn around and head back east.

We rented a house in Culver City owned by the Highway Department. For the first time the kids -- three now, with a fourth born in California -- had a backyard. They loved it...their mother loved it...slowly but surely, I loved it with them...becoming a Dodger fan took years!

Looking back on my vocational decisions over the years, the ones I eagerly chose didn't work out too well, while the ones I resisted were the most fulfilling. Some, including Pudge, see God's hand in this...I am not so sure.

I went to California to become the director of the California Migrant Ministry, a statewide program with 18 staffpersons located in all of California's agricultural valleys -- especially the huge Central Valley, the San Joaquin Valley. I was 29 but looked younger and felt younger.

Doug Still had given me a long list of church leaders I had to meet. On top of that list were the names Fred Ross and Cesar Chavez. Fred had built the Community Service Organization (CSO) into the West's most powerful Mexican-American civic action group, with chapters in every significant barrio in California and Arizona. He recruited and trained Cesar, who was at that time the director of the CSO. His office and home were also in Los Angeles.

By 1961, the Migrant Ministry had a 40-year history of serving migrant farmworkers, emphasizing health care, education, recreation for children, and summer vacation bible schools. In California, 30 to 40 college and seminary students worked with us each summer. For decades we had worked closely with denominations and local churches in agricultural valleys. In those days we were a "much beloved and much ignored" ecumenical ministry.

Our cooperative work with local churches was beginning to show some strain because of a growing emphasis on community organization, but especially because of our fight *against* PL 78, the Mexican bracero program -- in essence, a contract slave labor program with built-in protections for braceros and domestic workers that were *never* enforced by the Department of Labor. A coalition of labor unions, Mexican-American civic action groups, Jewish organizations, and Protestant and Catholic churches finally ending the bracero program on December 31, 1964.

It was a long, bruising battle that introduced me to public controversy. It was my first taste of being disliked and attacked. A useful preparation for things to come.

In 1962, Cesar Chavez left his position as director of CSO and moved from L.A. to Delano with his wife, Helen, and their eight children, where he began to organize the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), which, in time, became the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO.

It seemed like an impossible task. No one had ever successfully organized a farmworkers union in California. There had been many attempts but no lasting results. In 1962, California agribusiness was the 500-pound gorilla in everyone's living room, dominating both Republican and Democratic politics. In agricultural counties, growers controlled the board of supervisors, the school boards, local police, civic clubs, and the churches. Unlike the Midwest, large factories in the fields dominated the California agricultural scene. At that time, 7% of growers paid 75% of farm labor wages. The concentration is even greater today. Although many small family farmers treated their workers humanely, conditions for most workers ranged from bad to horrible.

From 1962 to 1965, we watched Cesar's efforts and supported him in any way he would allow. When he could, he came to CMM retreats to report on the ups and downs of his efforts. All of us on staff knew that nothing would change in the daily lives of farmworkers until they organized a union of their own, with power in their own hands to persuade growers to sit at the bargaining table and negotiate improved wages and working conditions.

In September 1965, Filipino farmworkers in the Delano grape fields went on strike, demanding a wage increase. A few days later, Cesar's NFWA voted to support the strike and to remain nonviolent. Cesar called and asked us to support the strike: by loaning him some of our staff, by organizing food caravans, by raising money for the strike fund, by joining workers on the picket line, and by inviting church people to come to Delano.

My staff was ready to go! Hesitantly, I said yes. Fortunately, we had no idea of what actually lay ahead of us.

We threw our staff, our energies, and our resources into supporting the strike. Within a week we had a California church delegation on the picket line (Bishop Sumner Walters; George Spindt, LCA; George Wilson, Presbyterian; Howard Fowler, Disciples). Two months later we organized a national church delegation to Delano (RM Brown; Kenny Neigh, Presbyterian; Cameron Hall, NCCC; Paul Stauffer, UMC; Mae Yoho Ward, Disciples; Gary Oniki, UCC; Rabbi Erwin Herman; Fr. Jim Vizzard; Msgr. William Quinn). In the first month of the strike, a number of CMM staff and visiting church people had gone to jail with the strikers. That caused the then-very conservative *Los Angeles Times* to editorialize against us, charging that churches should not meddle in a local labor dispute.

What was happening behind the scenes was going to occupy a major portion of my energies for the next two to three years. The growers knew quickly that the California Migrant Ministry was on the picket line. At first they were more annoyed than worried, more contemptuous than concerned. My guess is the growers were thinking, “What could you expect from these young, poorly informed Migrant Ministry radicals, seduced by that communist Cesar Chavez and his mentors Saul Alinsky and Fidel Castro?”

But as word of the strike spread and as the workers persisted in their efforts, the growers realized that church support could be a problem:

- It was hard to portray Cesar as a communist if churches and church leaders were supporting him.
- It was hard to claim that “there is no strike” when church people kept coming to see the strike and then went home to report on it.
- It was hard to claim that “our workers are happy and the so-called strikers are outsiders” when church people came and talked to farmworkers on the picket line and heard their stories.
- The civil rights movement made it hard for the growers and local clergy to claim, “These MM people are outsiders; we live here! We know the true situation.” In that era, many church leaders had been to the South; because of those experiences, they had discarded the belief that “local white people know best.”

Protestant growers began to realize that their beloved local church -- which they help build and which was even now nurturing their children -- was, through their denomination and the state Council of Churches, supporting the Migrant Ministry. They were shocked and outraged! Slowly but surely, nearly every congregation in every

agricultural valley in California passed a statement calling on their denomination to denounce the CMM and withdraw funding from the Council of Churches. It was a terrible time for conscientious clergy. I knew of only a few who stood their ground and survived in their pastorates.

To give you a little flavor of the times: a young, idealistic UCC clergyman in Arvin (near Bakersfield) did the natural pastoral thing: he prayed for both the growers *and* the workers involved in the strike in Delano. His board of trustees met that same day and informed him that there would be no more of *that!* Winthrop Yinger resigned his pastorate the next week.

In the early months of the strike, a large church in Visalia organized a debate: Cesar and I on one side, and Allan Grant, a prominent Presbyterian layman who was president of the California Farm Bureau, and a Berkeley economist on the other side. I had met with local MM volunteers in that very church in years past, when 15 or 20 people was a good turnout. But on this occasion the church was full and there were 300 to 400 people standing outside listening on a loudspeaker system.

As Cesar and I walked down the aisle -- hearing the murmurings around us -- he whispered to me, "Chris, they are angrier at you than they are at me!" It was an exaggeration, but not a huge one. Clearly, we in the MM had stuck our hands into a hornet's nest. In some ways we were prepared. In other ways we were not!

The farmworkers' strike and the church's involvement caused a three-year firestorm of controversy in every denomination -- none more than in the UCC; heroic church leaders like Dick Norberg, Walter Press, Nellie Kratz, Julian Keiser, Syd Smith, Carl Segerhammer, Harry Shaner, and many more crisscrossed the state

defending the work of the MM and pleading with parishioners to look at the needs and the legitimate aspirations of farmworkers.

I was invited or sent to more meetings, gatherings, and public forums than I could possibly handle. Many of them were overwhelmingly unfriendly. In time I learned an important lesson: don't water down a message to appeal to the majority. Instead, concentrate on the few people in the crowd who were supporting us in a hostile environment and speak to them! Give them the information and the rationale and the hope that they need.

The CMM survived:

- because we were known by denominational leaders, thanks to years of noncontroversial ministry in the fields;
- because we kept the issue focused on fairness, equality, and justice for the most exploited workers in our state (the growers tried to divert attention to *our* limitations);
- because most denominational judicatories in California are a mix of urban and rural churches, with the urban churches having more votes; and
- because we had many well-informed and brave friends in every denomination.

The CMM not only survived, we began to raise money from national denominations, which saw the seriousness and promise of the farmworkers' struggle. We sent new staff into the fields as worker-priests (a minister teamed with a farmworker). We sent many summer and year-round staff members into the boycott when the boycott became the focus of the farmworkers' efforts. We didn't donate money to the union; instead, we recruited, trained, and sent people from the churches into the middle of the farmworkers' movement -- but always in support of the union's priorities and in collaboration with its leadership.

In late 1966, the union decided that a strike alone was not going to bring the growers to the bargaining table. There were just too many hungry workers from Mexico willing to break the strike. The leadership and the workers decided to go out to all the major cities of the country to boycott California table grapes (from late May to Christmas, virtually all table grapes sold in the US are from California). Individuals and families who had never been farther east than Arizona, who had never seen snow, most of whom spoke very little English, headed out by bus and by car to NYC, Boston, Philadelphia, Miami, Chicago, Montreal, Toronto, Cleveland, and 20 other cities...and eventually to London and Hong Kong.

These farmworker families created a movement that reached into unions, colleges, high schools, civic groups, political parties, and churches. Marcos Munoz and his wife were sent to Boston to rid the town of California table grapes. They had the name of a friendly labor leader and a friendly priest. Being good Catholics, they called the priest first. The conversation went something like this...

M: Hi, Father, my name is Marcos Munoz. I am a Delano grape striker and I am here in Boston to boycott California table grapes.

Fr: Welcome, Marcos, I have heard about the strike. What can I do for you?

M: I need to meet with you, Father, to tell you about our campaign...

Fr: I'd like that...how about Friday morning at 9? (It was Wednesday.)

M: I was hoping it could be sooner. You see, my wife is here with me and we have no place to stay.

Fr (pauses): Well, I have a funeral at 3 and a confirmation class this evening...

M: Wonderful...Could we meet you for supper? Actually, we haven't eaten today...

You can imagine the rest. Marcos and his wife not only had dinner at the rectory, but they lived there until a boycott house was found.

How could anyone with love in their heart say no to these workers who traveled across the country to strange cities in order to tell their story...and ask for help?

As the movement spread across the country, life in our home got more complicated. I was gone more, I was preoccupied more, and I was on the phone more. Pudge, God bless her, believed deeply in everything we were doing. She focused her considerable energies on nurturing our four children. When the schedule worked, we dragged them all -- three boys and one girl -- to picket lines, marches, and demonstrations. To hear them tell it, they spent half of their childhood on one or more hot, dusty farmworker marches. Not so! Because of Pudge, they lived pretty normal lives, but with a father who was gone *way* too much, and who was on the phone *way* too much. I don't think the kids minded my being gone as much as they minded the distractions when I was home.

The farmworkers won the grape strike and boycott. In July 1970 the *entire* California grape industry came to the bargaining table. Ten thousand workers were now under contract.

We went to Delano to celebrate that remarkable victory. But not for long!

In 24 hours we were in Salinas, where the lettuce workers had just gone on strike. And so it went, day after day, year after year. One battle after another: strikes, boycotts, fasts, political campaigns -- grapes again, lettuce, wines, mushrooms, lemons, etc., etc. There was very little time for rest and relaxation.

To give you a little taste of the intensity (or craziness) of our lives: In 1972 I went to Union Seminary to recruit for the Ministry. I met Fred and Sue Eyster. He was serving a parish in mid-Pennsylvania. They were both restless for a social justice challenge. After a number of conversations, Fred decided to resign his pastorate and go west to work for the National Farmworker Ministry. It was not that simple, because they had three children, two in elementary school. That summer they packed all their belongings and waited for word from me about where to go. It was going to be L.A. or Arizona, but circumstances were such that I couldn't tell them for sure. So I told them to drive west -- all five of them -- and when they got to Denver to call me. They called from Denver and I said, "Come to L.A.," but I still didn't have an address, so I asked them to call again from Indio. I wonder sometimes how I had the gall to lead this normal happy family into the middle of this uncertainty and pressure. Their marriage did not survive. Fred eventually became my successor as executive director of the NFWM.

In 1975, California passed the first and only law to protect the right of workers to organize and negotiate with their employees. It happened because growers and chain stores wanted the boycott to end and because Jerry Brown was governor. It is still the only such law in the nation. Thanks to the Democrats, it has not been weakened and, in fact, has recently been strengthened.

The UFW still exists and is still organizing. Where the union is strong, conditions for farmworkers have improved dramatically -- with decent wages, health care, and a pension. Elsewhere in California and the nation, farmworkers are still among the poorest and most exploited workers.

I remained as director of the CMM and then the NFWM (formed in 1971) from 1961 to 1981. In 1981, Pudge and I moved from L.A. to the farmworkers' headquarters near Bakersfield, where we both worked within the movement until early 1989, when we moved to Sacramento.

I discovered over time, and with help of therapy and the Enneagram (a personality typology), that I was not *just* a champion for justice. I *was* a champion for justice, and I am grateful for those 27 years with the farmworkers. But I was also taking care of a need in me -- a need to fill a hole in my inner life and a need for a strong father figure.

I filled that hole in my life by pouring myself into this all-consuming farmworkers' struggle for justice -- a hard thing for our children -- doubly hard because how could they get mad at something so righteous? Thanks more to Pudge than anyone else, three of our four children are very proud of those farmworker years, and one is finally, at age 47, coming to terms with them.

Looking back, I wish I had been able to better balance the needs of my family with the needs of the Migrant Ministry and the farmworkers' movement. All through those years I felt pulled in three directions: always leaving home too soon for the next trip, leaving the administrative work in the office too soon to go to the

fields (thank God for Sue Miner), and leaving the latest crisis in the fields or on the boycott too soon. Always on a treadmill, always feeling that I should be doing more -- stretched and challenged by the example set by Cesar and the farmworkers with him.

But I have also discovered some positives in my underdog personality. There is no doubt that I understood better and felt more deeply the sufferings of farmworkers and their children. It also helped me keep my feet and my ego on the ground. I never felt that I was doing enough. As a result, I didn't feel better than our supporters in the churches. Surely they could be doing more, but so could I. Because of who I was, I could be just simply grateful for every deed of support, no matter how tentative and limited, and I believe our supporters felt the solidarity and the gratitude.

Of course, looking back is interesting but not exactly relevant. If I had been a different person, I might not have been in the middle of this justice struggle helping churches and church people make a difference. And we did make a difference!

How was the farmworkers union able to accomplish the seemingly impossible? Cesar started with himself, his family, a few friends, and all he had learned from Fred Ross in 10 years with the CSO.

By 1969, 17 million Americans were boycotting California table grapes (not an estimate, but a reliable poll). In every major city, supermarket chains were removing grapes from their stores. How did all this happen?

There are many reasons. I just want to focus on four: Cesar's commitment, the power of sacrifice, the love in human hearts, and the clarity and persistence of the movement.

1. In 1962, Cesar and Helen decided they were going to build a farmworkers' union -- no matter the cost and no matter how long it took. It was a commitment unlike almost all the ones we make.

2. Farmworkers went on strike, not knowing if they could succeed, but risking everything nevertheless. They traveled across the country to strange, cold cities...and they stayed for years, to invite us to help -- all of them living on subsistence and \$5 (later \$10) per week. The power of their example was irresistible to millions of Americans -- many of them from the churches -- who responded from their hearts.

3. The farmworkers' plea for solidarity touched something deep inside us -- the very best part of us -- our yearning for a more just and peaceful world. Their plea also triggered our wish to help others, to get beyond our comfortable neighborhoods, to stretch ourselves for the sake of justice -- and so we leafleted, picketed, marched, and sat-in and prayed-in -- and went to jail when necessary.

And, in time, we became the ones who reached out to others. Homemakers who were at their core polite, gracious, and proper, ended up with leaflets in their hands talking to their neighbors in front of supermarkets, urging them to boycott grapes and, later on, to boycott their local grocery store...and some of those women ended up in jail. And we began to discover the love in the hearts of others.

I will never forget a woman I met in front of a Fazio's market in Cleveland, Ohio. The National Farmworker Ministry was meeting in Cleveland, and we set aside one morning to join the local farmworker boycotters. We split into teams of four to cover as

many stores as possible. The store I was at was the largest and least expensive in that area of Cleveland. We were asking people to boycott the entire store so we could persuade Fazio's to handle only union iceberg lettuce. We were not having much success!

A lady drove up with three children in a battered VW Beetle. When she got out, I asked her to support farmworkers by not shopping at Fazio's. I will never forget her face. She was black and she was tired. With her kids by her side, she said she couldn't afford to shop at another store. I said I wouldn't dare ask her if it weren't so important, and then I told her about what life was like for farmworkers. She thought about it, looked at me with those sad, beautiful eyes, and quietly said, "OK" -- and she took her children and drove out of the parking lot.

I had tears in my eyes. She knew she had joined our campaign against Fazio's, but she had no idea what she had done for me. Her willingness to leave her store for the sake of farmworkers gave me the spiritual strength to talk to the next 10 shoppers who couldn't care less...until someone else said yes. And I realized in that moment that the 10 shoppers who walked by, or spat out insults, or just didn't care were human beings, but they didn't matter to our cause. We were going to win this boycott because of the few who responded from their hearts and did a small deed for justice. And we were going to survive in those parking lots -- not by ourselves, not by our own stamina -- but on the wings of those who cared.

Cesar was not a great speaker, nor was he an imposing figure. But people wanted to be where he was -- farmworkers and supporters. In part it was because his deeds matched his words, but it was also because he and the farmworkers with him called forth the best in us -- and when we responded, we felt better about ourselves and we loved him for it.

4. All of this commitment, sacrifice, and love would not have affected the chain stores or the growers if the union had not been clear on its goal and persistence in pursuing them. The boycotters were there day after day, year after year, working hard and making sure we always had something useful to do. They not only reached for our hearts, but they gave us simple, practical deeds that, joined with many, many others, made a difference...and they refused to quit. They evaluated their strategies and changed course as necessary, but they did not quit! In time, the growers could not sell their grapes for a price that justified harvesting them, and then they considered the unthinkable: sitting across the table from their Mexican hired hands and negotiating a contract.

In some ways these events, which had such an impact on the churches, were an accident in history. We just happened to be there in the fields, with personal knowledge of the lives of farmworkers and their children, and with a deep yearning for change. When the strikers asked for our help, I guess we could have said no -- but it is hard to imagine that.

We managed a complicated relationship with Cesar and the union because we were clear on our role. We were there as supporters, following the movement's lead -- even when we had doubts about the direction. We had influence, not because we were so educated and smart, but because we were there, in the middle of things -- at all crucial planning meetings -- and because the support of the church community had become important to the survival of the union.

People used to ask me, how do you keep your spirit up, year after year after year? That was not really an issue for me -- because of all the companions I met along the way. If you have ever seen a

strikebreaker working in the fields and at the same time thinking about the pleas coming to him from the picket line -- often most powerfully from women -- and then watched him stand up, walk past his boss to join the cheering strikers...to see the pride in his eyes and knowing how much courage that took...that experience carries a lifetime of spiritual energy. I can still feel it.

Farmworkers, boycotters, Migrant Ministry staff, brave men and women taking their first steps into a supermarket parking lot, friends I made, my family -- they filled my spirit and kept me going.

I had concluded years ago, and quite firmly, that God only comes to us through the invitations, challenges, and friendship of others...that Jesus meets us only in the faces of the poor and the sick, the lonely, and those in prison. Then a friend made a revealing comment about the difference between introverts and extroverts, and I began to think that maybe my longstanding, firmly held theological conclusion about where we meet God is based entirely on the fact that I am an extrovert. I am still pondering that one.

The most important thing I learned from the farmworkers movement was that *anything is possible* -- that given certain key ingredients, we can bring about a measure of justice for even the poorest of the poor. A few determined pioneers can become many, and the many can wear down the most powerful and entrenched forces.

I believe it is because of love! Our love for others and our willingness to put that love into action...and by our actions to reach to the best, to the goodness in others, which causes them to step forward, to stretch their spirits, and to join a gathering multitude of committed men and women. I believe it is a rhythm embedded

deeply in God's universe...that, when embodied by humans, can produce an unstoppable movement for change.

But without focus, all that human goodness, all that love, can be mere sentiment and good intention...no match for the principalities and powers who *are* focused and well funded and who do not sleep!

(This talk was given at Pilgrim Place to the churchworkers' retirement community where Chris and Pudge now live.)