

LABORNET - 2001

A RARE, UNHERALDED CHAMPION OF AMERICAN WORKERS

By Dick Meister

How many people can you name who truly devoted their entire lives to helping others? Not many, I'd guess. So let me tell you about Jim Drake.

He was a Protestant minister, a key but largely unsung driving force in the rise of the United Farm Workers union and in other efforts to improve the lot of poor, oppressed and powerless workers.

Drake died in September ('01) at 63 in Massachusetts. He had been there since 1995, leading an interdenominational organization that helped immigrants, minorities and others secure affordable housing and better schools and freely exercise their civil rights.

That was but one of several such projects Drake was involved with during his all-too-short life. He helped workers in Texas' Rio Grande Valley get water and sewage facilities for their badly neglected communities. He led a campaign in New York City that brought 800 units of affordable housing and a new public high school to South Bronx. He helped pulpwood cutters in Mississippi negotiate contracts with paper manufacturers that brought much needed improvements in their pay and working conditions.

But it was Drake's work with the farm workers union that stands out above all. For 19 years, from the union's very beginnings in 1962, he served as one of UFW President Cesar Chavez's top aides.

The two met shortly after Drake, a chunky, intense young pastor only recently ordained, joined the California Migrant Ministry, an ecumenical group whose mission included helping bring economic and social justice to the state's highly exploited farm workers.

Drake had been assigned to community organizing tasks. Chavez, who was then leading the community organization that was to become the union, agreed to train Drake by taking him on as a part-time staffer. He soon became Chavez's full-time administrative assistant, his salary paid by the Migrant Ministry.

Drake was admittedly headstrong, impatient and paternalistic, but he learned from Chavez the calm patience that was the union leader's greatest asset. As important, Drake learned that the key to successful organizing, as Chavez so effectively proved, was to convince workers to organize themselves rather than wait for commands from a paternalistic leader.

"I really thought Cesar was crazy," Drake once recalled. "Everything he wanted to do seemed impossible."

But thanks in part to Drake's work, the seemingly impossible eventually was realized. He joined with Chavez and other union officers and staffers in almost daily and nightly meetings in the homes of farm workers, giving them guidance but never orders.

Drake helped organize the union's founding convention, helped lead the dramatic strikes, boycotts and marches that captured national and international attention and support. He helped rally the support of other clerics, despite heavy pressure from ministers of grower-dominated congregations. He registered voters who backed UFW-supported candidates and ballot measures, raised money to pay rent and buy food for strikers -- and much, much more.

"Whatever the need was, Jim was there," noted Dolores Huerta, a co-founder and longtime officer of the UFW. "He had a very, very big heart."