

UNITED FARM WORKERS :

Reflections on the church's ministry

Migration Today #20 1981

By the Rev. Wayne Chris Hartmire, Jr.

"We started with two principles: first, since there wasn't any money and the job had to be done there would be a lot of sacrificing. Second, no matter how poor the people, they had a responsibility to help the union... (The union was built) because of this core of people who were willing to stop talking and start sacrificing to get it done". (Cesar Chavez)

I have been asked to be personal and reflective. It is not what I usually do but I will try. For 19½ years I have been the Executive of two ecumenical church groups * which have sought to add life and strength to the United Farm Workers unionization effort. During this time I have lived in two worlds: the world of the predominantly white middle class churches and the world of the farm workers' struggle. In May of this year I will stop being Executive Director of the National Farm Worker Ministry; my family and I will move to the headquarters of the United Farm Workers (UFW) to shoulder some of the internal work-load of the movement.

I am a middle class, North American Christian (United Presbyterian Church in the USA, by denomination). The United States' reality is the only one I know from experience. Beginning in seminary, Bonhoeffer was the theologian who spoke to me. He was an educated, affluent, German Christian whose openness to the suffering people of his time drew him inexorably into a sharply focused, limited and imperfect social movement. In the process of this transformation he gradually lost contact with the mainstream churches and their programmes; and he slowly but surely (but not completely — until his last hour) gave up the privileges of his class and his profession. He wrote less and less of discipleship and ecclesiology and more and more of responsibility and incognito action in the world. Because of his life, his words speak with power: "God is weak and powerless in the world and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us... It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world... The Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity. She must tell men and women, whatever their calling, what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others".

But Bonhoeffer didn't quite touch the place where I organize my life. My serious decision-making problems arose with the advent of Cesar Chavez and the farm workers' movement. They put "existing for others" into flesh and blood in front of my eyes and there was no avoiding the challenge: living in voluntary poverty, persistent beyond middle-class imagining, willing to go any place under any circumstances for the movement — these UFW folks made sacrifice and service into a living Word in the fields and in the cities. Their example made other farm workers (and non-farm workers) squirm and change.

We in the Migrant Ministry (National Farm Worker Ministry) joined our hopes and deeds with those of the UFW. We sent most of our staff to work side-by-side with the union staff. We took our cues from the union's goals. We organized churches and church people around the UFW's needs (strikes, boycotts, prayer services, legislation, marches, celebrations, etc.). Our focus was clear. Most of the churches didn't know about us or wished they didn't. But a minority cared deeply and together we contributed to the victories farm workers have enjoyed since 1965 when the Delano grape strike began.

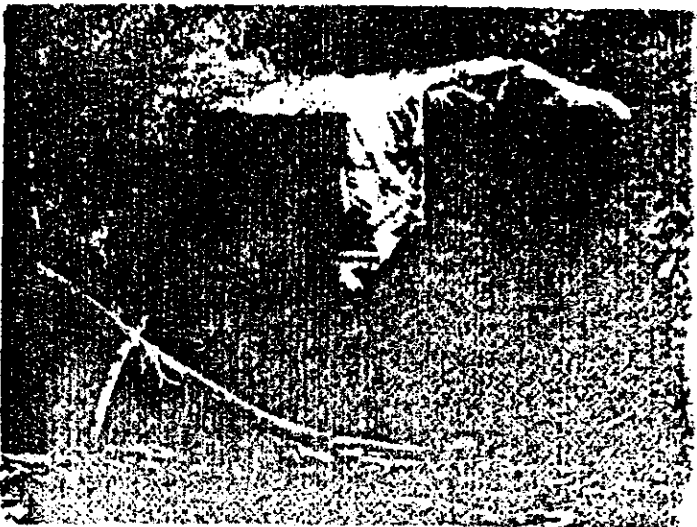
We have been accused of being too close to the union, of

lacking an independent, prophetic, Church perspective. It is a troubling criticism because it is so close to the truth. We are one flesh with the people of the UFW. We, undoubtedly, have lost an independent perspective. In speaking to the public about the farm workers' struggle we tell the truth, but not always the whole truth. We don't dwell on or highlight the imperfections and contradictions within the union. And our work is intentional, not accidental or spontaneous. You could say we have chosen to "sin boldly" in order to stay with this particular group of farm workers who are doing the work and making the sacrifices for the sake of justice for all U.S. farm workers. (Bonhoeffer made a similar, but much more serious, choice in regard to the German resistance movement). Some in the churches cry out: "Surely there must be another way".

I remind my friends that we are only one small part of the Church's life. I have tried to think of an alternative way of being a ministry with the farm workers' movement. But my thoughts always lead me in the direction of closer, not looser, ties to the UFW. If we took only a few steps away from the movement, it would be too far. Why? Because an important part of our own energy and stamina for the long haul comes from the urgency and vitality of the movement... Because we would lose that location, that position in the movement which enables us to lead supporters in the direction that makes sense to farm workers' struggle... Because we would no longer be *naturally there* for celebrating the Eucharist, burying the dead, comforting the sick... Because we would lose our day-to-day influence in the movement... And finally and most importantly because we would be less present with our human energy and therefore less useful to a struggle that needs all the strength it can get.

The farm workers taught us how to focus our lives and our organization on one people, one struggle. It was both a dangerous and a joy-filled lesson. The course of events forced us to let go of several other ways of being with farm workers; because of the urgency of the strike and boycott (and the example of the strikers and boycotters) we had no time for meetings with other agencies, with friendly government officials, with people who wanted us to receive and spend federal anti-poverty resources.

We let go of dozens of peripheral relationships and "fruitful" projects. We learned to focus on the people of the UFW movement — on their battles and their needs. It was



Gayanne Fellinghoff Photo

dangerous because the closer we got the more we were challenged to respond, the more we were drawn into the swirl of the action. It was like putting one finger in the wringer of an old-fashioned washing machine; before you know it the rollers have your hand, your forearm, your elbow — and the whole body is shaken to its heels.

I used to tell people, half in jest, half seriously "Don't get too close to Cesar Chavez and the farm workers' union. It is dangerous; they want your whole life". Then I would think how Biblical that was. That's what Jesus wants too, my whole damned life. Bonhoeffer said it this way: "Jesus does not call us to a new religion, but to life". (*Prisoner for God*, p.167)

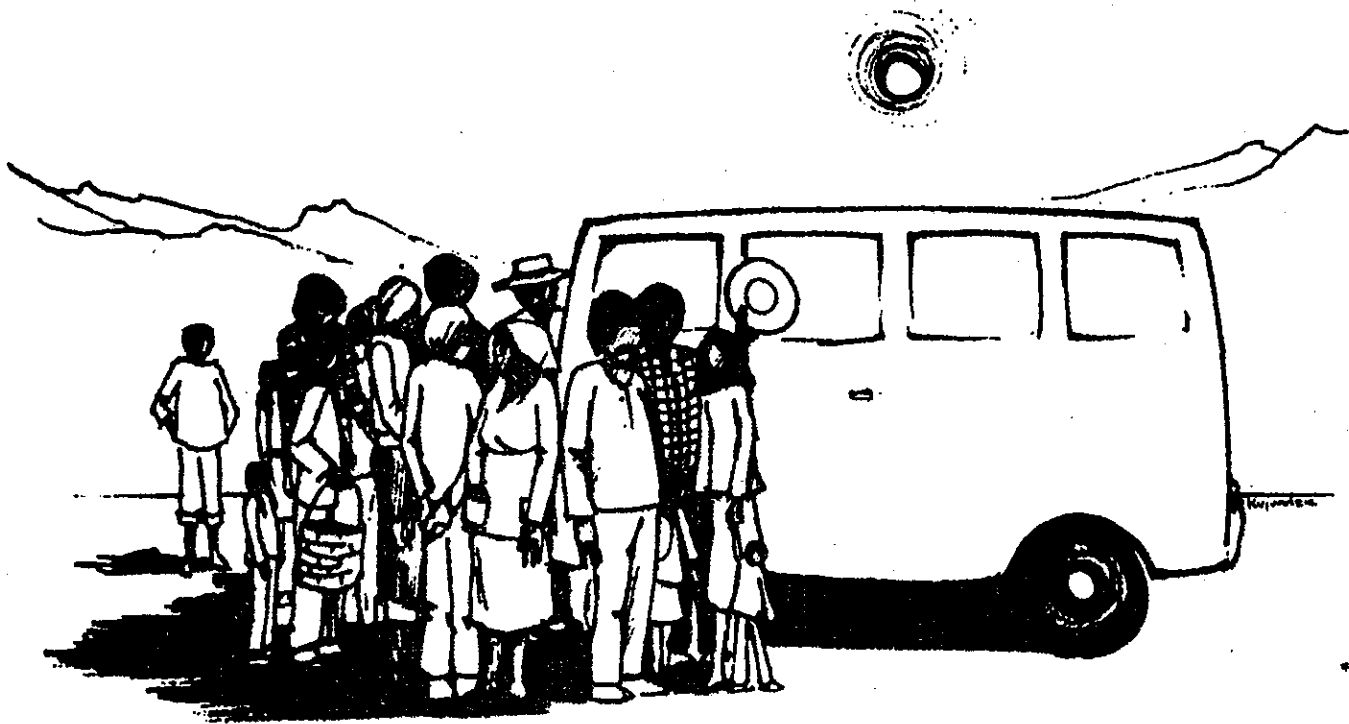
We let go and we focused and we discovered a new level of joy. Time and again we were with farm workers as they

indifferent toward possessions and focused on the needs of others. It is a revolution for any time and any place.

An interviewer asked Cesar Chavez what he would advise young people to do with their lives. He responded "I would ask them to choose one important area of human need and focus their energies in that direction — so much so that their lives are touched and changed by the people they work with". (*Sunday Visitor*, 12.7.80)

It is a place to begin — for the young and not-so-young. It may take a 5-year plan, but it is worth making a beginning. It could be God's call toward a new life, a call to let go of an orderly, well-protected existence and 12 "crucial" issues in order to turn your life over to one people, one community.

Through the centuries saints, organizers, priests, religious and plain folks have turned their lives over to



(LARA)

threw off decades of fear for the sake of their justice dream! Can anyone sing, pray, dance, celebrate and play like people on the move, taking strength into their own hand. Could one ever hope to be doing something every day that *feels* meaningful, that makes sense, that produces such a singular experience of community with those who are doing it with you! (Even with those you don't like at all).

Slowly but surely we let go of a safer, more structured past and discovered a non-violent revolution, a way of living life for others, a way of being Christian in the world. It was not a perfect way and certainly not a perfect movement; and we, of course, tried to hold onto some of our protections and privileges; but, we did catch a glimpse of the road that Jesus is calling us toward. It is life-filling, open to everyone,

people. In the process they have lost control of their daily (and yearly) schedule and discovered a whole new way of being — a new life of purpose, struggle, community and joy. The gospel promise turns out to be true: if you give your life away, you will discover authentic life, as God intended it to be. (Mk. 8:35) It is certainly past due time to "stop talking and start sacrificing to get it done".

* The California Migrant Ministry and the National Farm Worker Ministry. The mission statement of the NFWM reads as follows: "The NFWM is a ministry of the Church whose purpose is to be present with and support farm workers as they organize under the leadership of the United Farm Workers of America to overcome their powerlessness and achieve equality, freedom and justice".