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# 'The more trouble we get, the more religious we get.'

An interview with  
Cesar Chavez

**O**n the wooden sign at the top of the little road were carved the words, "Nuestra Senora de la Paz" (Our Lady of Peace). Secluded in the rural foothills of Kern County, California, is "La Paz," the national headquarters for the United Farm Workers union. Here is where the key leadership of the UFW live together in community and direct a poor, smart, determined movement in the work of making justice for farm workers real and dependable.

On this hot summer day my daughter and I had rented a car and come to "La Paz" to interview Cesar Chavez, the leader of the UFW. We were directed to an office adjoining Cesar's. There were posters on the walls. "For our children—the luxury of childhood" was one. Another had a quote from Dom Helder Camara: "When shall we have the courage to outgrow the charity mentality and see that at the bottom of all relations between rich and poor there is a problem of justice?"

Cesar's office was quiet and lined with books. Plants hung in the windows. Here is the interview that followed.

Pat Hoffman

Several questions below refer to the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act which went into effect August 28, 1975. Under the law, the union representation elections are mandated for any ranch where at least 50 percent of the total work force requests it. If union representation is chosen, growers are required by law to bargain in good faith.

*Boycotts can be initiated against growers who refuse to bargain in good faith. If union representation is voted down, however, the law prohibits boycotts against the grower involved.*

*The UFW is now using boycotts selectively. It urges consumers to boycott Gallo and Hemet Wholesale Nursery products and to buy only union label grapes. The union also urges protests directed at the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Co., which controls Coachella Valley Growers Inc. and which is resisting signing a UFW contract.*

**The Editors**

**Pat Hoffman:** I would like to know what the focus of the UFW's work is right now.

**Cesar Chavez:** The main thrust of the work has to be the consolidation of the gains we have made. This means trying to negotiate contracts where we have won the elections. Even more important is the servicing of the contracts. Basic to these tasks is the question of developing dependable and adequate staff. Because of the voluntary nature of the staff, it's like a river; people come and go. So one of the important things we have to try and do is to stabilize the volunteer staff so that we have more long-term volunteers to be able to do the job of consolidation.

**Hoffman:** Has the election law here in California changed the nature of the work within the union as well as the work outside the union?

**Chavez:** Tremendously so. We knew that the new legislation was going to have an impact on the union, but we had no way of knowing how big it would be. It changed everything. It affected everything we do, even our way of thinking. What the law does is make us legal, and that has a lot to do with life. We now have the standing of being a legally recognized group. Along with the benefits of that standing also come demands. You get something, then you have the responsibility of having it. I don't think we've seen half the impact.

**Hoffman:** One of the things that I have been wondering about is that the law in California seems to have had a major effect on the boycott, which also affects how folks who are not farm workers can relate to the struggle.

**Chavez:** One of the things that was probably more effective than anything else was the boycott and the millions of people who involved themselves with the farm workers through the boycott. Now the boycott is just one of two or three alternatives we have toward the ultimate goal of getting a contract signed.

**Hoffman:** What are your hopes for being able to sustain the vitality of the

union? It looks like a tremendous task.

**Chavez:** The law not only has affected our way of thinking and the way people work with us now. It also changed, in a very profound way, the way in which we work; how we perceive what we are doing and how we are doing it. It shifts us from a time of a lot of motion, a lot of movement and a lot of uncertainty, too, when we said, "these are the rules and if you follow them you will probably get here." There is more demand for accuracy, more demand for facts. We now are faced with trying to find out how to maintain the vitality we had, so that it goes beyond just shouting "Viva la Huelga" and getting the union going. We have to find a way of enduring. I am convinced that we have to do something to replace what was lost. We had a kind of community. We were united because the persecution made us united . . . we had an urgent cause. But in fact, we were not really united in terms of staff and in terms of community. We discovered that quickly.

So it seems to me that from here on out it will be very difficult for people to work in the union as individuals, coming in and kind of doing what they would like to do best and being in the eye of the

storm, but still being separate. There are some of us advocating forming a community, first within the staff, which goes much further than just being on a picket line together—an identifiable community. I don't know how we will get to Florida or much past Texas in the organizing drive unless we really develop some kind of community so that the strength of all becomes the strength of one, and we then share and stay together.

**Hoffman:** What do you think would be the basis for holding that kind of community together?

**Chavez:** I think it would have to be the deep concern for social justice and, in this case, justice for farm workers. Of course, this is very easy to say, but to carry it out we need to have a closely-knit community where people find their strength. We need to make sure that we all together develop strength, and that each one of us feels the strength of all those who work with us, so that when that strength is needed, it will be there—because there are ups and downs.

**Hoffman:** There has always been a religious expression present in the life of



the union and yet the union is essentially a secular institution. I would be interested in knowing how you see that development.

**Chavez:** I think what has really happened—if we go back and analyze it—is that the more trouble we get, the more religious we get; the less trouble we have, the less religious we are. And so what we need to do is find a way we can express our beliefs, to deal with our spiritual life in a way that is lasting. The main thing to take into consideration is that some of those in the union don't want any part of this religious aspect and, of course, we respect that. But there are also those who want even more than what we are giving them, so we must strike a balance. And that is very difficult.

**Hoffman:** If you had to guess, which would you guess will be the direction—more or less outward religious expression?

**Chavez:** Well, I am prejudiced—I think it will be more. If we establish a community, a stronger, closer community, there will be more religion present. If we don't, it's going to become like most groups. The real crucial step

right now is at the staff level and not at the membership level. We are at the crossroads now. It's a crucial decision and I don't know which way it will go.

**Hoffman:** Can you list the elements of the two ways?

**Chavez:** In one case hours of work being 9:00 to 5:00, salaries, regular vacations, distinct and separate family life, having staff meetings during working hours, occasionally, getting together on picket lines, having meetings in the evenings. That's one kind of community. Or in the other case: we stay together day and night and learn how to live with one another, and if we do that, we can do a lot more things without the money. But it also means because we're a tighter group we will be willing to give up some of those individual rights that we had, for the good of the group. Also, if we do this, it means we will be vastly more disciplined and we will be more effective. We will be acting together because it will come out of the experience of living together. If we choose this community style we will have some kind of religion—either we invent one or we keep what we have, but we cannot be without one. It is very meaningful and important.

## We're at a crossroads now as to whether we're a 9-to-5 group or a more disciplined, more religious community.

**Hoffman:** Does this come out of your examination of what has happened with other communities or is it intuition on your part?

**Chavez:** No, it is not intuition, it's just history. First of all we started out with the idea of having staff that would be able to take anything in terms of sacrifice and work. Some of us accepted that and that was what was preached to staff, and everyone knew it. And there are some of us who are still wanting to do just that. However, along the way we picked up a lot of people who were willing to do that but only for a short period of time because they thought that once we won, we would be over the hump and we might get more normal (having salaries, etc.). We had this original staff way of doing things for 15 years, but that plan is not working anymore. We have to come up with other alternatives if we are going to keep the vitality of the

## Church involvement with the Farm Workers

In his interview, Cesar Chavez refers to the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM) and the California Migrant Ministry (CMM). The migrant ministry goes back to 1920 when church women in New Jersey began day care centers for the children of migrant farm workers. With the participation and support of ecumenical women's groups (today known as Church Women United) the migrant ministry spread to 38 states. In California the migrant ministry began in the late 1920s.

For most of its life the migrant ministry was a much beloved and much ignored corner of the church's life, struggling to find a way to be faithful to the gospel in the midst of farm worker poverty and suffering. Migrant ministry programs were usually of a service nature: health education, recreation, remedial reading, vacation Bible school, mobile clinics, toys at Christmas, and turkeys at Thanksgiving. There was an ongoing uncertainty about the goals and programs coupled with the painful knowledge that conditions were not changing and that church programs were not adequate.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Rev. Doug Still and the rest of the California Migrant Ministry met Fred Ross and Cesar Chavez, who were at that time organizing the Community Service Organization (CSO). Most CMM staff spent some time with Fred and Cesar, going along with them as they did their work. When Chris Hartmire (Rev. Wayne C. Hartmire, Jr.) became the director of the California Migrant Ministry in 1961, the staff was already asking basic questions about the migrant ministry program:

*Don't all of our efforts—even our best ones—leave farm workers dependent upon us or some other outside force? When will the day come when farm workers will have strength in their own hands to fight their own fights, to deal with school boards, to bargain with employers, to gain better wages, to buy toys for their own children?*

In 1962 Cesar Chavez left the CSO and began organizing a farm workers union. The California Migrant Ministry staff watched his efforts and helped in any way he would let them. When the grape strike began in 1965, Cesar and the farm workers asked the CMM to help. They asked for food for the strikers, money for gasoline, and staff to be with the union. (Jim Drake, a



United Church of Christ minister assigned to the strike in Delano, remains today as one of the key leaders of the farm workers movement.) Chavez also asked church people to come to Delano to see the strike and tell the story in the cities.

The CMM responded, and a whole new world of controversy and struggle opened up. Growers in churches all over California demanded an end to their denominations' support of the CMM. Almost every church body had a major, two to three year internal battle over the nature of the church's mission among farm workers. State Councils of Churches were the first to support the grape boycott, and most denominations resolved the issue in favor of church involvement with the farm workers' movement. In the process of the struggle, thousands of Christians became directly involved in supporting the farm workers' strike and boycott. A tiny little finger of the church's life (the CMM) was drawn into a washing machine wringer in Delano and the whole Body shook with anguish and pain . . . and God's justice was served.

By 1968-69 the UFW was a national movement with boycott offices in every major city in the U.S. and Canada. In 1971 the CMM joined with other Catholic and Protestant groups to form the National Farm Worker Ministry, which has as its goal to *be present with and support farm workers as they organize to overcome their powerlessness and achieve equality, freedom and justice.* The NFWM has focused its resources and energies on the UFW because of a basic conviction that there will be one farm workers' union in the U.S. led by Cesar Chavez and the farm workers with him who have demonstrated over the last 15 years the skill, the determination, and the courage that is required to win contracts and build a nonviolent workers' movement.

The NFWM, related to the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., has its main office in Los Angeles. There are currently 35 families on the staff—all supported on subsistence, in the style of the farm workers union (room, board, and \$10 per week). Most staff families work somewhere inside the farm workers movement (boycott, field office, clinic, day care, administrative headquarters, etc.); but the NFWM's Mission Department has offices in Florida, the Northeast, the Midwest, and California which are responsible for connecting the churches and the people of the churches with the farm workers' struggle. For further information contact NFWM's director, Rev. Wayne (Chris) Hartmire, 1430 West Olympic Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90015. □

union. So you see, this comes from experience, but also from our reading of the history of other groups. Changing things now is risky. But we have to take some risks in life anyway, or it doesn't mean anything.

**Hoffman:** Do you see any relationship between the issue of subsistence and community—and also getting other workers organized elsewhere?

**Chavez:** Yes. We can't live on subsistence pay and live as individuals. But I don't mean that we join the group and lose our identity as individuals; I mean that in joining the group there are certain things we give up for the sake of being together in community. I don't think we can continue to do what we are doing now. We have done it for 15 years and I think it is time to change. We have to anchor it down and have a coming together. So to live on subsistence pay means we have to have a real strong, solidly-based community.

**Hoffman:** Do you see a relationship between those things and reaching out to other workers—getting to organize workers in Florida, Texas, and across the country?

**Chavez:** Yes, very definitely. Let me tell you what is happening: right now, other unions throughout the country are battling less than .500 in organizing workers. Workers just don't want a union for the sake of money. Some workers are saying they don't want more money; they want a better quality of life. We are finding that out now even in the fields. Already in Coachella we signed a contract for \$3.35 and the growers the next day gave their workers \$3.35 per hour without a contract. So the workers are saying "We don't need a union. I can get it from the boss without the union."

Of course, that's not true—if the union wasn't in Coachella the workers would not have received the \$3.35. It was a way for the grower to gain more power with the workers—to keep the workers confused. It is difficult for the worker to make up his or her mind.

So we can't sell the union on the basis of more money; we have to do something else. That something else we are looking for, I think we can find in community. It's a strong brotherhood, not only in the sense that you build a union and you get better wages and working conditions, but it's also a sense of belonging. Even in a highly industrialized, complex society, religion still means a lot. And people are not all looking inside the walls of the cathedral. People are looking everywhere, they are thirsting. And a lot of the hunger and search comes from middle-class kids. That tells us something.

**Hoffman:** A lot of people who come into

the union find it to be a more vibrant expression of the church's life than they have found inside the institutional church. I think a lot of the young people who come to the union could be responding to that. It's certainly related to your own faith position and the work you have done. I wonder if you would say something about what you believe to be the central message of the gospel.

**Chavez:** It's an understanding that we have to do something while we are here. We have learned, because of our faith, that the direct message is that we are our brother's keeper and we should try to correct injustices when we see them. I don't try to define it in very glowing terms. We keep it simple. People become attracted to the movement by those statements and, of course, we still feel that way. Through the years, I think that people, church-related people, young people who had some involvement when they were kids in various different religious activities, find the movement an expression of that. I don't know today if that's true, probably less than in the heyday of the arrests and all the persecution that was taking place.

We very directly say what we are doing, that this really came from Christ's message—no one disputed that, and no one really agreed to it. It just came out. A lot of people came to the movement because of it and others came for other reasons. How to really manifest that source and make it more clear is our goal right now. How do we really say that what we are doing here is more than just getting wages for farm workers, it goes far beyond that? To be very honest, I am searching my soul right now for the expression of Christ's message. I think the movement is also searching. For me and others who have been around for a long time, we don't find it very fulfilling now to just say, "We are our brother's keeper and we should fight for social justice." We want to have more meaningful experiences than that, even along with the work we do to bring about social justice.

**Hoffman:** The farm worker ministry, both as the National Farm Worker Ministry and its predecessor, the California Migrant Ministry, has had a close relationship with the union. Can you describe what that relationship has been? I know it is a big question to ask because it is complex.

**Chavez:** Well, I can make a very complex question very simple. What happened is that before the union got started we had made some contact with the migrant ministry because they were also involved in the whole idea of how to get this work done. Through experience they saw the frustration of the people and felt the great need to bring about justice for farm workers. So we kind of met on the road. They were there and

they tried what we've done, but they didn't do it right.

When the strike started, however, when the real controversy started, we found the migrant ministry joining us immediately. They changed their program completely in '66 and '67. They were more controversial than the union itself. They were the starting point in getting church people from all over the country involved with us. They were the instrument for interpreting us to peo-

What do you want people to know about you, self?

**Chavez:** About myself, I don't know. I have never thought about it. It really isn't important. People learn one good thing about you and one bad thing about you. So the more good things they know about, the more bad things they will know about. But one of the most important things we've accomplished is that people do know about farm workers. We had the experience about a

as the wellspring of that power.

**Chavez:** It's the people, the motion. Power is very elusive. It is here today and gone tomorrow. But it's being able to gather people around, very specifically on the issues—people who are directly affected by the problem. And we have been able to solve a few things so that we have been able to give the workers some kind of hope. Then bringing them all together naturally creates power; that's the basis for it. But because the world doesn't stand still, what's power today isn't power tomorrow, unless you keep up with the world. A lot of our power is just the good will of the people outside the farm labor areas in the cities. When we needed help, it was a clear force that got us over the hump. So far we have been able to do that. I don't know how long we are going to be able to do that. At some point it is going to have to be the workers themselves. To really demand support and continue to get it from most people, we have to build a real basic brotherhood.

**Hoffman:** Identify what is your personal source of power and determination to keep on going. It's been a long time.

**Chavez:** That is a very hard thing for me because a very personal kind of response is needed. I think it is my responsibility to do whatever I can. I say that because I don't know how to really express the real reason. That's not the real reason, I am sure. But it's like a fire, a consuming, nagging, every day and every moment demand of my soul to just do it. I am not confused about what I want to do, but what is to be done—and I am thinking of how to do it. Who gets me to do it, I don't know; it's a very personal kind of thing. It's difficult to explain. I like to think it's the good spirit asking me to do it. I hope so.

**Hoffman:** There is one last question I would really like to hear your response to. A lot of people I talk with and hear about in the church are saying at this point that they are really tired of hearing about farm workers. They have helped a long time and now there are other things to do. If you were getting that response from someone in the church, how would you respond to it?

**Chavez:** Well, to be sure, I would feel saddened by it, but I also know enough about life to know that these things happen. There is nothing you can really do except say, "Look, you were eating ten years ago; today you are still eating and the same people as ten years ago are still feeding you. These people aren't getting tired. What if they got tired and said they were not going to go to work? Where would you get your food?" □

ple. Chris Hartmire and his gang went up and down the country interpreting what we were doing in the light of the controversy that existed. And it split church committees wide open. People were taking sides. We didn't win all of them, but we won a lot. A lot of the church people supported us.

**Hoffman:** A lot of people across the country, through television and newspapers, know something about you.

week ago coming back from Connecticut. One of the flight attendants said, "Aren't you Cesar Chavez?" I said yes. And she called another attendant over who didn't know who I was, and it embarrassed the first one. "You should know. You know, the farm workers." "Oh yes, the farm workers!" She knew that.

**Hoffman:** The farm workers have been able to build some power. I wonder if you would say a little about what you see



CPA photo

The document contains several paragraphs of text, which are mostly illegible due to extreme noise and low contrast. The text appears to be organized into sections, possibly separated by headings or sub-headings, but the specific content cannot be discerned. The overall appearance is that of a heavily degraded scan of a document page.