

## **ACCEPTED TO SERVE**

### **My Years with the Farmworker Movement**

The summer I turned twenty-four my husband Cecil along with our two little ones moved to Mendota, California. I was from the city and this was a rural community of 2500 on the westside of the vast San Joaquin Valley. Cecil had just completed his seminary training. He was hired by the California Migrant Ministry (CMM) to work in a new Fringe Ministry. He would serve as pastor of the tiny Mendota Methodist Church with an assignment to help that congregation reach out to farmworkers who had settled in East Mendota or were living fairly permanently on nearby ranches. It was 1958.

For three years I observed the injustices and discrimination suffered by farmworkers. I also experienced how little people of good will who were not farmworkers could do to right the wrongs and how some efforts actually made things worse. In 1961 we left Mendota and moved back home, to Los Angeles, where Cecil was called as Assistant Pastor at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Westchester.

Soon after we moved to Westchester, Rev. Chris Hartmire, also Presbyterian, came to Los Angeles as Director of the CMM. Chris provided ways for both of us to stay linked with farmworkers.

In July 1965, now with a third toddler at home, I traveled up to Tulare County for a march in support of farmworkers protesting a raise in their rent for dilapidated, in fact condemned, housing that had been put up in the 1930's. We marched from the farm labor camp, where we had been given a tour, to the County Court house five miles away. This was the first of many trips I would make to the San Joaquin from Los Angeles. Each time I saw conditions for myself, heard directly from farmworkers, and was shepherded by people associated with CMM.

In the Fall of 1965, the Agricultural Workers' Organizing Committee (AWOC) started the Grape Strike in the Delano area. The fledgling National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) soon joined the strike though it had no strike fund to support its members. The California Migrant Ministry and other supporters scrambled fast to get food, money, and other needed supplies up to the strikers. Chris called me and asked me to phone area pastors to urge them to have food collections at their churches and to participate in car caravans to Delano to deliver the food.

At our modest house in Los Angeles we had one phone. It was mounted on the wall in the dining area right next to the doorway into the kitchen. I would set up the ironing board by the phone and iron while I made phone calls and kept an eye on my youngest. (Back then everything required ironing and there was a lot for five people.) I was anxious about making these calls to pastors that I didn't really know. But I called dozens of Presbyterian clergy. Before every call I would brace myself and then go forward. I kept in my mind farmworkers I had known in Mendota, especially women who experienced so

much powerlessness. They needed a union to help them achieve some control over their working conditions and livelihoods. To my surprise some of the pastors welcomed the chance to help by collecting food and getting it up to farmworkers in Delano.

Chris Hartmire understood that only farmworkers would have the continuing will to press for needed changes. I believed this from what I myself had seen. Chris and the CMM provided context for me and many others to support farmworkers in their press toward change. This was an entirely different concept than church people of good will coming up with a plan to “help the less fortunate” either politically or with donations or programs.

In December 1965 the Schenley Boycott, the first of the NFWA boycotts, was introduced. The Christmas season is a key time for liquor sales. Chris asked me to leaflet in front of a Westchester supermarket. Louise, my closest friend, would not allow me to engage in this boycott activity alone. She, always the artist, made a gorgeous, heavy sign with artificial grapes cascading from the top of the weighty stick. We took turns, one would hold the sign and the other would speak to customers outside the door and give them leaflets. I remember one chilly December evening a socially conservative member of our church came to shop. She didn't like our message and wouldn't take our leaflet.

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1970. I was again leafletting, this time in a grocery store parking lot in the L.A. area, east Inglewood actually, with Chris Hartmire. My youngest child was now in school for the full day and I was restless. The question of what I would like to be doing was on my mind in an inchoate way. In a spare moment when no shoppers were coming toward us, I told Chris I would like a job with the CMM. He said he would think about it.

A few days later he called and suggested that I might work part-time educating and recruiting church women to help the farmworkers. We dreamed up some name for the position. My first responsibility was to fly to Atlanta and participate in the formation of the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM). The idea was to move away from state migrant ministries to a national ministry that could better respond to the United Farm Worker's needs for support from national religious bodies, especially for the boycotts. I was hired by the California Migrant Ministry, but within a short time, I was on the staff of the new NFWM with its national reach and responsibility.

The next five years were hectic ones for the United Farm Workers. They were continuing strikes in many different locations throughout California and running innovative consumer boycotts of everything from grapes and lettuce to Gallo wines and S&W canned goods. All of them were related to getting contracts in the grapes and later in lettuce. Chavez was an amazing organizer and strategist and had surrounded himself with creative and courageous people. At any given time the UFW might have sixty or seventy strikes going on, at least one major, nationwide or international boycott, some law suits, demonstrations being planned, negotiations going on. The UFW could shift strategies in

a minute and it often seemed like they did. Well, not every minute but easily within a day or two or starting one strategy they would shift to a different one.

Now, this was a factor in making the next five years hectic ones for the NFWM staff. Chris would get some denominational leader on board to support such and such a boycott strategy or to get people lined up to help in a particular way and suddenly the UFW's plan would change. This was nearly incomprehensible for many denominational executives who were used to programming with three year plans. I imagine for some their first reaction was, "Can't these farmworkers get their act together?" Yet even with these challenges the NFWM was able, under Chris' leadership, to gather support for the UFW boycotts and strikes from national religious groups, Jews, Roman Catholics, and Protestants of every stripe.

My particular job was two-fold, education and organizing in the churches. Sometimes the educational job was to assist in interpreting why these sudden shifts occurred and to keep people on board and helping. Writing articles for denominational magazines was another way I hit upon to help people in the churches to understand how we had moved from summer programming and sending donations to farmworkers to standing on picket lines, being arrested, and supporting consumer boycotts that were, sometimes, economically hurting and infuriating staunch members in the churches. Frequently, my articles were based on interviews with farmworker women or with women in leadership with the UFW. In one respect, their stories mirrored my own and those of many church women as we were trying to break out of old, constricting gender roles and trying to make a difference with our lives. Virtually all my writing about the farmworker movement through those years focused on women in the union. I was gratified to learn that these interpretive articles were often used by the UFW boycott offices across the country.

I also arranged for farmworker representatives to speak at denominational and interfaith events in cities all over the country. Sometimes I accompanied them, sometimes not. I have snapshot memories from some of these events. I remember accompanying Dolores Huerta, Vice President of the NFWA, to speak at the theologically conservative Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. She was warmly received. Afterward she said to me, "I never thought the churches would support us." I remember a few years later, sharing a hotel room with Maria Salgado in some city where she was going to be speaking to a national gathering of church women, and learning more about her life as a young farmworker who had gone out on the boycott. We were just two women who were taking risks and doing things that were new to us because someone had given us the chance.

The other part of my job was organizing and sometimes training, church women, to help the farmworkers. I'm recalling a leafletting training day in Los Angeles. There must have been thirty or so women from different denominations gathered at a downtown church where we talked about the importance of having middle class people leafletting with farmworkers in grocery store parking lots. We talked about the issues, did some role playing and then they divided into small groups and went out across the city to leaflet

with farmworkers. A few hours later, they returned to the church to talk about their experiences and hear a pep talk by Chris Hartmire. These women and many others become regulars at particular supermarkets and became friends with the farmworkers who were responsible for the boycott in the L.A. area.

Another ongoing feature of the boycott work was organizing religious delegations to visit top management of the supermarket chains. In the early seventies there were, as I recall, about 26 chains in Southern California. Our goal was to get chains to stop carrying boycotted items, such as grapes or lettuce from certain farms or, later, grapes from any source. I would try to get an appointment, but often arrived at the chain's offices without one. I would meet with the delegation for a few minutes in the parking lot or on the sidewalk to lay out our strategy and suggest talking points that different people would take. Then we went in and did our best. Many of the people who went on these delegations had previously gone to Delano, the Coachella Valley, or some other site to learn directly from farmworkers what they were experiencing and why they needed contracts and protections. Those first-hand observations brought power and commitment to the delegations' meetings. And if we were in some waiting room trying to get in to see some management guy the delegates could be tough and unyielding. For my own part, I had a leadership role in these situations that I would play out in spite of my tremulous heart and dislike of confrontation. Malvina Reynold's song "It Isn't Nice" became my internalized song: "It isn't nice to block the doorways. It isn't nice to go to jail. There are nicer ways to do it, but the nice ways always fail."

I attended all NFWM Board meetings and these were not your typical board meetings held around a board table with power point presentations on farmworker problems. Chris took the Board where critical farmworker actions were taking place. One that stands out in my memory was the Summer of 1973 Board meeting in the Coachella Valley where a critical showdown was in progress between the UFW, whose grape contracts had just expired, and the Teamsters Union, which was signing sweetheart contracts with the growers. All the Board members were sent out to stand on the strike lines with UFW workers around vineyards miles from town. Teamster goons were facing the strikers--and us, standing between the strike lines and the vineyards. These guys were huge. The strikers were in constant danger. One priest had been seriously beaten a few days earlier. But we were there to be in solidarity with the farmworkers, to provide them some protection, not with our size and brawn, you can be sure, but with the public visibility we could bring. We were also there so we could experience what was happening, so that our program decisions would carry the urgency of this reality.

In the Fall of 1975, after California had passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act intended to guarantee that agribusiness would have to negotiate with the union whenever representation elections were held showing the will of the workers, I left the staff of the NFWM. I continued writing about the farmworker movement for the religious press through the 1980's, including a book, *Ministry of the Dispossessed: Learning from the Farm Worker Movement*. The book brought together the stories of many religious men and women from across the country who wanted to tell how their lives were changed and

deepened by the farmworker movement. These were the stories of the people who brought the urgency and rightness of the farmworker struggle to the churches and accomplished the remarkable feat of getting boycott support resolutions from nearly every faith body in the nation. The key figure in pulling off that miracle was Chris Hartmire. Nearly everyone I interviewed credited what they were able to do to their confidence in Chris as a man of faith and a truth-teller and his hundreds of written compilations of exactly what happened at this ranch and that ranch, hundreds of different sites of the farm workers' struggle.

In the end I had to leave in order to find my own voice. But the opportunities afforded by the farmworker movement helped propel me and thousands of other women and men out of the limits we had been trained to accept and to stand with farmworkers and others in the incredibly difficult and messy business of seeking justice.

Pat Hoffman  
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