

Justice Peace Links

Justice and Peace Committee – Churchwide Coordinating Team – Presbyterian Women

2010 • Issue 2

Migrant Workers and the Beth-El Farmworker Ministry

Overview

Have you ever looked at a tomato and thought about human trafficking? It doesn't seem like a natural connection, but the virtual enslavement in which many migrant farmworkers find themselves is indeed human trafficking.

Often very poor, without papers and lacking fluency in English, migrant workers live and work at the mercy of employers who can pay too little or allow inhumane working conditions. Field laborers work overtime to be paid just pennies per heavy bucket of produce harvested, pushing or breaking their bodies to deliver produce for our supermarkets and restaurants. Lacking alternatives and unable to seek legal aid because of their immigration status, migrant workers continue to toil in unjust conditions.

After PW's September 2010 Churchwide Coordinating Team (CCT) meeting, members of the CCT had the option to visit Beth-El Farmworker Ministry, a recipient of a 2007 PW Birthday Offering grant, in Wimauma, Florida. Beth-El, first and foremost a worshiping community, offers migrant farmworkers and their families educational opportunities and services to meet basic needs. Four members of the PW Justice and Peace committee share their impressions here.


Beth-El, meaning "house of God," is just that. This worshiping community has a variety of programs to help farmworkers achieve self-sufficiency through education, worship and services that meet basic needs.

We saw a big area where volunteers pack grocery bags of food for distribution each week. With donations of money, Beth-El buys some food in bulk, such as beans and rice, then divides it into smaller packages. Local churches also donate food, allowing Beth-El to give groceries to an average of 635 families a week. Volunteers also collect clothing and toiletry items to give to farmworkers and their families.

Beth-El offers other services such as GED classes, legal services, adult education and computer classes. Beth-El has served many years, assisting the poor, oppressed and marginalized members of the farmworker community, a "third-world" country in your own backyard.



Jupiter Images

—Muriel Stephens, 
synod representative, Mid-America

Beth-El is a worshipping community that is a covenant partnership between The Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC) and the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PC(USA)). Beth-El is in covenant with three presbyteries: Grace Presbytery from the CPC and the Presbytery of Tampa Bay and Peace River Presbytery of the PC(USA).

I was impressed by Beth-El's sanctuary and that approximately 160 farmworkers come to the Tuesday prayer and Sunday worship services. The 2007 Birthday Offering grant was used to help fund the expansion of the sanctuary. Dave Moore, director of Beth-El, explained that they still need to do more fundraising to complete the expansion.

It will be important for PW to consider how to best help Beth-El, particularly as the 2012 Churchwide Gathering will be held in Orlando, very close to Wimauma. We should look for ways to support this "third-world" country in our own backyard.

—Ana Camila Vazquez,

 synod representative, Puerto Rico

Isaw Beth-El Farmworker Ministry through the eyes of a person who was a child of an itinerant family and who, as an adult, worked with a largely homeless population. For me, the experience elicited very mixed thoughts and feelings. The children appeared to be healthy and happy. The classrooms were colorful and well-equipped. The staff, at all levels, seemed to be caring and sensitive to the needs of the children and the population with whom they work. Yet, the enormity of their mission seemed to carry with it an underlying sense of urgency, mingled with pain, which was palpable. Trusting that God will do wonders among us helps us to know that the work of Beth-El will enhance the lives of all involved.


—Margaret Anderson,

 synod representative, Mid-Atlantic

One of the major projects of Beth-El is its charter school, which enrolls about 180 students. The facilities are attractive and well-maintained. As a retired elementary teacher, I was impressed with what I observed in the kindergarten classroom we visited. The learning environment was age-appropriate and well-done. The materials

displayed and being used were from components of current and well-recognized educational programs. We also were told that the students (who were very well behaved!) scored well in state testing.

—Janice Takeda,

 chair, Justice and Peace Committee



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Position

The 217th General Assembly (2006) passed a resolution in support of an ongoing partnership with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Campaign for Fair Food in 2006. Read the resolution at <http://pcbiz.org/IOBView.aspx?m=ro&id=1139>.

Learn more about the PC(USA) Campaign for Fair Food at <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/fairfood>.

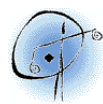


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Biblical/Theological Foundation

James 5:1–7 (NRSV)

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you. Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.



Questions for Discussion

-  Do we think of ourselves as “rich people” (v. 1)? Why or why not?
-  Who do you think is being called to account in this passage?
-  Many of the observations from the trip to Beth-El focused on the faith community of migrant workers and the children of migrant workers. What other parts of farmworkers’ lives can you imagine being affected by the market prices of produce?
-  In Margaret’s reflection, she notes feeling urgency and pain. Do you sense these emotions in this passage from *James*? Do you feel them in your daily life? At restaurants? In the grocery store?
-  Does “being patient” (v. 7) involve action? (Hint: Think about what the farmer does while waiting “for the precious crop from the earth.”)

Here’s What You Can Do

The Campaign for Fair Food has templates for letters to send/deliver at your local grocery store, and postcards that can be ordered to send to grocery store CEOs. Find out more at <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/fairfood/take-action-fair-food>.

Download “I Dream of Immokalee,” a reflection by Cheryl Queen about her visit with the Immokalee farmworkers (from the March/April 2010 issue of *Horizons*): www.pcusa.org/resource/i-dream-immokalee.

Learn more about migrant workers and the work of the PC(USA) on food justice by visiting <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/fairfood/education-resources> or by contacting Noelle Damico, PC(USA) associate for fair food concerns, 631/751-7076 or noelle.damico@pcusa.org.

Learn more about Beth-El Farmworker Ministry at www.beth-el.info.

Learn more about the plight of migrant workers in Florida through Interfaith Action, www.interfaithact.org, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, www.ciw-online.org.

