



Connecting Faith Communities and Farmworkers

There are many ways that congregations can get involved in the lives of farmworkers. Some models for getting started are outlined below. Visit www.ncfarmworkers.org/resources for more information on each model.

Ministry with farmworkers remains controversial today because:

- Many (but not all) farmworkers are undocumented immigrants. Discussions about labor conditions or wages often quickly become discussions about immigration.
- Many growers are facing shrinking profits, with some families losing their farms to development, foreclosure, or other economic factors. In this context, there is much resistance to the idea that farmworkers should earn higher wages or have more rights on the job.
- Going back to the legal institution of slavery in the 1800s, there is a deeply ingrained societal norm that farmworkers should be treated differently than other workers and don't deserve better conditions. This is reflected today in the belief that if people just work hard enough, they will be able to get better jobs. It can also be seen in attitudes by some growers, policy-makers, and others who believe that the status quo is acceptable.

Despite or perhaps even because of these challenges, we as Christians should be particularly interested in working to create a society that adequately values farmworker contributions and welcomes immigrant workers into our communities.

Develop a Process

As you consider how to introduce farmworker issues into your congregational context, it can be helpful to outline the whole process you hope to go through with your congregation before you begin. Please check out the website above for more information about how to approach controversial issues in your congregations.

Prepare

- Pray.
- Clarify your goals.
- Articulate your own feelings and opinions on this topic.
- Meet with farmworkers and people who work with farmworkers.
- Study the issues. Use our resource guide to get started.
- Think carefully about the people in your congregation. Meet with those that have a direct connection to farmworkers (e.g., growers or those that grew up working in the fields). Are there some who would likely be supportive? Are there others who might not be?
- Decide on a program—which model will your congregation utilize?

Implement

- Do everything you can to create a safe space for everyone.

- Model respectful dialogue.
- Publicize the program.
- Be patient. This is difficult work.
- Use the resources of your denomination and local organizations.

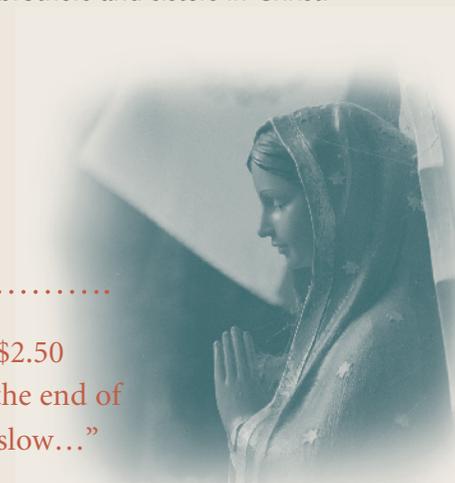
Follow-Up

- Remember that this is a process. You will probably encounter new and different questions as you go.
- Develop appropriate next steps. This could be further study, a service opportunity, an outreach project, a delegation with farmworkers, or supporting an advocacy campaign.
- Summarize and celebrate your conversations. Be honest about areas of disagreement and highlight blessings discovered along the way.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is helping a congregation begin to see farmworkers as created in God's image and thus full members of our community. In theological terms, we might use the language of "strangers no longer" and "brothers and sisters in Christ."

“On the first day of picking okra I barely did four boxes. They were paying me \$2.50 per box, which would total \$10. I spent \$5 on lunch, and I was left with \$5. By the end of the day I was left with nothing. All the money was gone. Because the work was slow...”

South Carolina Farmworker



Explore Common Misunderstandings

We've found that most of the controversial conversations about farmworkers are based on myths or misunderstandings. Many of these myths can fracture communities and pit one group against another. You may want to explore these in your congregational discussions as a way of moving members to a better understanding of our farmworker neighbors.

Faith and Politics

- **Myth:** Christianity is about the spiritual, not the political. We shouldn't talk about wages, racism, immigration, or other political issues in church.
- **Fact:** Jesus was a very political figure in his time, and at least some in the Church have always followed his lead in ministering with those who society attempts to marginalize. Christians should speak up and get involved when it comes to issues that are central to biblical teaching, like caring for the poor and welcoming the stranger.

Immigration Status

- **Myth:** Undocumented farmworkers could immigrate to the US legally if they wanted.
- **Fact:** Under our current immigration system, there is no path available for the majority of poor farmworkers to apply for legal residency or work status. A very small percentage (less than 10%) of NC growers use the guestworker (H2A) temporary work visa program, but there are no visas for "unskilled," "essential" workers who fill year-round jobs. Many undocumented immigrants would rather have a legal status in the US, but lack a way to gain that documentation.
- **Myth:** If farmworkers are undocumented, then they do not have any rights.
- **Fact:** All workers, regardless of immigration status, have basic rights on the job. These rights should be protected if for no other

reason than when they are undermined it offers a competitive economic advantage to employers who purposefully hire a vulnerable workforce over those growers that follow the law. Everyone deserves dignity on the job, no matter their occupation or country of origin.

Economic Factors

- **Myth:** Immigrant farmworkers take jobs from US workers and get free housing and benefits.
- **Fact:** The small percentage of growers who use the guestworker (H2A) program are required to pay workers above minimum wage and provide free temporary housing. The majority of farmworkers work more than full-time for below-poverty wages and no benefits, and are not protected by health and safety laws protecting all other workers in the US. Many farmworkers that pick our fresh fruits and vegetables cannot afford to feed their own families.

National Origin

- **Myth:** Conditions here are better than in farmworkers' home countries. They shouldn't complain.
- **Fact:** Many immigrant farmworkers have better housing, extended community and family, and were once farm owners in their country of origin. However, because of lack of jobs and opportunity, economic necessity forces some people to migrate in search of work. It's a tremendous sacrifice to leave one's family, live isolated from others, and go years without seeing your children in order to provide for them.

Getting Started

Here are some concrete ideas for how to help your congregation get involved with farmworkers:

- Sponsor a congregational meal that highlights farmworkers' contributions to our food system.
- Invite small groups to participate in a Bible study focused on farmworkers.
- Host a knowledgeable speaker who works with farmworkers or invite farmworkers themselves to share their first-hand experiences.
- Participate in a service project such as a bilingual book drive or long-sleeve shirt drive to benefit farmworkers and their families.
- Take up donations to support the NC Migrant Emergency Fund or an organization supporting farmworkers in your area.
- Include farmworkers in pastoral prayers and other parts of the worship service.
- Preach a sermon about farmworkers.



Get Involved & Learn More!

National Farm Worker Ministry: www.nfwm.org

NC Council of Churches: www.nccouncilofchurches.org

NC Farmworker Institute: www.ncfarmworkers.org

Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF): www.saf-unite.org