



Farm Workers, Mennonites and Justice

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By Richard MacMaster

Last month Ervin Stutzman as executive director of Mennonite Church USA joined other religious leaders calling Wendy's restaurants to sign the Fair Food Agreement with other major tomato buyers, 95% of growers, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, to assure fair wages and decent working conditions for farm labor.

The men, women and children who harvest the vegetables and fruits we eat are invisible to most Americans. We Mennonites may be familiar with migrant farm workers, but how many of us have heard their stories and know what life is really like for them?

For our congregation, Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Gainesville, Florida, a Sunday morning sharing time with workers from the tomato fields of Immokalee in 2009 was an eye opener. We learned about difficult working conditions, the impossible number of huge buckets of tomatoes needed to earn close to minimum wage, the prevalence of sexual harassment, and what farm workers themselves are doing to change this.

We invited the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to bring their Modern-Day Slavery Museum to our new meeting house. When they came, our local newspaper was running stories about an unscrupulous Haitian labor contractor who recruited laborers in Haiti. These laborers agreed to pay him large sums for a legal job in Florida. They then worked eighteen months on a farm a few miles from Gainesville while the contractor pocketed their wages to pay the debt. We learned that this kind of servitude is commonplace in Florida.

Farm workers found allies in churches and on campuses. In 2010 Kimberly Hunter asked Eve MacMaster, her pastor at Emmanuel Mennonite, to help organize the churches of Gainesville. Kimberly drew up a statement for the initial meeting, showing that the call for justice was a Biblical imperative rooted in the prophets and the words of Jesus.

Our congregation was the first to join the Gainesville Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Justice (IAIJ), which is now a coalition of a dozen faith communities. With our partners we've been working ever since to implement that Biblical vision.

Berea Mennonite Church (Atlanta, Ga.) had a similar experience hosting the Immokalee workers when they came to Metro Atlanta. Pastor John Wierwille and his congregation reached out to other Atlanta churches and to our own conference to enlist their support for farm workers.



Richard MacMaster, speaking here at a rally, is chair of the Southeast Mennonite Conference Task Force on Farmworker Justice. He is a retired history professor and a member of Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Gainesville, Florida.

Fast forward to 2014. In January the Leadership Board of Southeast Mennonite Conference created a Task Force on Farm Worker Justice. We on the task force are committed to helping congregations Southeast Conference and Mennonite Church USA connect with farm workers and support their efforts to improve their living and working conditions. We expect to soon have curriculum and study group resources. We hope to bring our concerns to the conference assembly this year and to Kansas City next summer.

Meanwhile, if you would like to bring a speaker to your church or want more information about the Fair Food Campaign, contact Claire Comiskey at Claire@interfaithact.org. To learn more about our Task Force or our community efforts e-mail me at gainesvilleiaij@gmail.com