

response

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**Fighting for
Fair Food**



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Victory for Farmworkers

THE COALITION OF IMMOKALEE WORKERS FIGHTS FOR FARMWORKERS' RIGHTS, AND FLORIDA UNITED METHODIST WOMEN STAND WITH THEM. by **MICHELLE BEARDEN**

Rosemary Uebel has lost track of how many marches and protests she's joined with other United Methodist Women members to create awareness and improve conditions for Florida's farmworkers.

But there is one statistic she cites with pride.

"I've never been arrested, not once," said the St. Petersburg, Florida, grandmother of five. "We make our case with love and peace. We keep it positive. And that approach has proven to be very successful."

Ms. Uebel, a member of First Methodist Church of St. Petersburg and the social action coordinator of the Florida Conference United Methodist Women, has seen her share of victories in the eight years she's been involved with the farmworkers' movement, led by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. The latest came in January when The Fresh Market signed a Fair Food agreement with the coalition ensuring humane wages and working conditions for the workers who pick fruits and vegetables on participating farms.

Fair Food Program

The Fresh Market became the 13th major retail food corporation—and fourth in the supermarket industry—to join the partnership among farmers, farmworkers and retail food companies.

With the agreement, the chain will increase its purchases by 15 percent



Julie Brannaman

Farmworker Luisa Acevedo and daughter Leticia, 8, at the Parade and Concert for Fair Food in March 2015 in St. Petersburg, Florida, sponsored by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Florida United Methodist Women joined them.



Left to right, Vincent Incarvite, Allison Casey and Jon Berger with D.C. Fair Food walk with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers during the Parade and Concert for Fair Food in St. Petersburg, Florida, in March 2015.

Julie Brannan

from the coalition's Fair Food Program, which determines the growers whose practices are fair and socially responsible. The Fresh Market will also make an annual contribution to the Fair Food Standards Council, the third-party monitoring organization that oversees the compliance with the program's human rights standards.

"My faith tells me that we're all God's children," Ms. Uebel said. "That means I'm against slavery of any kind. And what happens with farmworkers is nothing more than modern-day slavery. Some haven't had a raise in 30 years! So I feel I have no choice but to stand up and speak out."

Although there is plenty of work to be done, supporters are encouraged by the momentum to improve the plight of migrants who toil in the fields picking crops like tomatoes, strawberries and oranges for poverty wages. And United Methodist Women members are credited for their high-profile

role as important allies to bring about change.

"The United Methodist Women have been with us all along the way. They've offered so much support over the course of our campaign in so many different actions, right alongside the farmworker women," coalition member Lupe Gonzalo said through an interpreter. "We've demonstrated that we have the power together to make a change and to ensure human rights for farmworker women in their fields."

Coalition of Immokalee Workers

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, or CIW, a worker-based human rights organization based in Immokalee, Florida, first came on the scene in 1993 when a small group of farmworkers began meeting in a room borrowed from a local church to discuss how to better their working conditions and their lives. Community work stoppages and

hunger strikes drew attention to the issues in the early years, but once the coalition launched a consumer network in 2000, its work became elevated on a national level.

Since then, CIW has earned several prestigious awards for its contribution to humanitarian issues, economic development and ending human trafficking. It has won some wage increases for Florida tomato pickers and led successful campaigns to bring fast-food giants such as McDonald's, Taco Bell and Burger King on board to buy its tomatoes only from suppliers that did not exploit workers in the field. Perhaps the most significant development came in January 2014 when mega-retailer Walmart joined the Fair Food Program, putting its immense clout behind the movement by pledging to expand its commitment beyond tomatoes and Florida.

Elena Stein of the Alliance for Fair Food, one of CIW's partners, said it would be impossible to measure just how



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Rosemary Uebel, member of United Methodist Women, is a longtime supporter of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Here she joins their march for fair food in St. Petersburg, Florida.

important United Methodist Women's support has meant to this ongoing battle.

"Farmworkers put the food on the table for Americans, yet they can't afford to feed their own families," she said. "Our Methodist supporters get that. They put out a call to their members to be activists and they respond. They have been emissaries for the cause every step of the way."

Joining the movement

Nancy Vanderwall of Venice is one of those emissaries.

Before taking on the position in 2012 of mission coordinator for social action

for the Florida Southwest District United Methodist Women, she wasn't aware of the gravity of the living and working conditions of farmworkers in her adopted state. That didn't mean she wasn't interested in human rights; as a longtime educator on the southside of Chicago, Ms. Vanderwall lived in a multiracial neighborhood and immersed herself in civil rights issues.

As she looked for areas to direct her interest in human justice, she didn't have to look far. Some members of United Methodist Women from other districts throughout Florida were already immersed in the farmworkers' move-

ment. She joined one of their protests in front of the Lakeland, Florida, headquarters of the Publix Super Markets chain—which to date has refused to get on board with the Fair Food Program—and knew immediately she had found a cause she could passionately support and get behind.

"It all made so much sense to me," said Ms. Vanderwall, a member of Grace United Methodist Church in Venice, Florida. "This is about dignity, this is about fairness. If you profess to be a Christian, but if you do nothing after witnessing the injustices that marginalized people suffer, then you

aren't really living your faith. Actions always speak louder than words."

Ms. Vanderwall took her case to the United Methodist General Conference in Tampa, encouraging United Methodist Women members to join her on a trip to Immokalee to meet migrant women face to face and hear their stories. Once you develop personal relationships with people from a different culture and background, she said, you will learn that their wishes and dreams are the same as yours. They want security and hope, just like you.

She expected a few dozen, at best, to take her up on the offer. More than 140 showed up.

"It was an incredible experience," Ms. Vanderwall said. "I've always said there is so much strength when women work together. Start by getting to know each other, and you've laid the groundwork for so many possibilities to make a difference in this world."

Among the highlights of her work in the movement: Taking part in the historic 15-day, 200-mile March for Rights, Respect and Fair Food in 2013. Hundreds began the walk on March 3 in Fort Myers, Florida, concluding two weeks later with a rally in Lakeland outside Publix corporate headquarters. Forty-five churches and community groups fed and housed the marchers, who carried placards and waved banners along the route to draw public attention to the campaign.

Ms. Vanderwall's role was to help organize the free meals at local churches in her district. Again, it was yet another way to build relationships between farmworkers and their growing network of supporters.

"You see all these people coming together, from all walks of life, and you



Julie Branaman

Farmworker Lupe Gonzalo at the Coalition of Immokalee Workers Parade and Concert for Fair Food.

know you are witnessing something very special," she said.

Fighting for fair food

This March, she and Ms. Uebel were among thousands who traveled from as far as Massachusetts by bus, car, truck and plane to converge in St. Petersburg, Florida, for a parade through the city in support of Florida's farmworkers. The three-mile route purposely included taking the participants by Publix and

Wendy's, a fast-food chain that has not joined the Fair Food Program. The day concluded with the first-ever Concert for Fair Food.

Though the mood was joyous and carefree on that sunny spring day, supporters acknowledged that there is much more work to be done. Their attention is now focused on bringing Publix into the fold by convincing the chain to pay "one more penny per pound" for tomatoes, which would be



Julie Bennaman

Elena Perez of Alliance for Fair Food leads a chant for participants of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers Parade and Concert for Fair Food in St. Petersburg, Florida. She stands in front of Wendy's, who has yet to join the Fair Food Program.

given to the farmworkers. However, Publix continues to maintain that the issue is between the workers and the farmers.

"We have always believed our food should be brought to market in a fair and sustainable way and that farmworkers should receive fair wages and be treated with dignity and respect," said Publix spokeswoman Maria Brous. "The CIW's Fair Food campaign makes it sound like Publix is unwilling to pay the extra penny per pound and more. To give workers better wages, we will gladly pay more for tomatoes if our suppliers will put that penny in the price they charge to us."

Ms. Brous said it is "not appropriate" for Publix to pay another company's workers directly. At its core, she said, "this is a labor dispute. It is the Department of Labor's role to enforce the laws that protect workers' rights." Though corporate officials have not met with the coalition members, it has countered with a statement outlining its position on the campaign, as well as its commitment to sustainability, on the company website.

Ms. Stein said Publix "just doesn't get it" and is not following the lead of other retail food corporations in the Fair Food movement.

"There's hypocrisy here. Publix promotes community, family and faith, yet won't even sit at the table with farmworkers to look them in the eye," she said. She said supporters are still waiting for a response to a letter signed by more than 100 United Methodist women to Publix chairwoman Carol Jenkins Barnett, daughter of the late Publix founder George Jenkins, imploring her to reconsider the company's stand.

Barnett happens to be a Methodist, Ms. Stein said.

"The letter is from members of her own flock, which should have some influence. They want her to follow the teachings of the faith," she said. "In recent years, we've seen historic gains in the human rights for farmworkers. It's a shame that Publix is on the wrong side of history."

Ms. Vanderwall isn't giving up. Although it sometimes feels like a David versus Goliath battle, she has seen enough positive changes in bettering the lives and wages of migrant workers to know obstacles can be overcome. After all, who would have guessed Walmart would ever have signed the agreement? So she focuses on the victories and continues to encourage her sisters in faith to never give up the fight. Their strength comes in working together for the common good.

"Whenever I give a speech, I remind them to be proud that they are Methodist women," she said proudly. "Because Methodist women get things done." ■

Michelle Bearden is former religion reporter for *The Tampa Tribune* and WFLA-TV and is now a freelance writer specializing in faith and values in Tampa, Florida. She's a two-time winner of the national Supple Religion Writer of the Year award from the Religion Newswriters Association.