

(OPERATIONAL BUSINESS ITEM)

RENEWING DISCIPLES SUPPORT FOR FARMWORKER MINISTRY

WHEREAS, over two million migrant and seasonal farm workers labor in the fields, orchards, vineyards and groves of America; and

WHEREAS, the average wage for migrant and seasonal farm workers in the United States is \$11,000. The great majority lack health insurance and all other simple protections enjoyed by most other workers; and

WHEREAS, their labor is vital, since their work provides the food we eat daily; and

WHEREAS, migrant and seasonal farm workers face many dangers and have many needs. They often suffer poisoning from toxic chemicals, pesticides and herbicides. Pregnant women have been known to give birth in the fields while working. Some workers have died from heat, exhaustion and dehydration. Small children must often accompany their parents in the field. Workers often endure insult, harassment and abuse of many kinds from labor contractors, employers and crew bosses; and

WHEREAS, Christians are instructed by scripture and the teachings of our faith to have compassion for the poor and oppressed; and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has a tradition of more than eighty years of support for migrant and seasonal farm workers through the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM), an organization comprised of more than thirty denominations; and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) needs to resume our ministry of justice with migrant and seasonal farm workers that was halted in 1994 due to declining budgetary resources; and

WHEREAS, the Disciples Home Missions (DHM) in recent years has provided assistance in the development of a new organization (the Disciples Farm Worker Ministry – DFWM) and has given encouragement in the effort to resume Disciples participation with the wider interdenominational community working together through the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM);

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) renew its relationship with the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM), thus renewing a Disciples commitment to work with other Christians in this ministry of justice with migrant and seasonal farm workers; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) resume its support for migrant and seasonal farm workers through the new organization known as Disciples Farm

48 Worker Ministry (DFWM), affiliated with the Disciples Home Missions (DHM); and
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50 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DFWM develop a program of support and participation in
51 the work of the NFWM; and
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53 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DFWM designate a person or persons to represent the
54 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with the Board of the NFWM; and
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56 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DFWM recruit and enlist persons from Disciple
57 congregations to be participating members of DFWM; and
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59 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DFWM provide information about farm workers for the
60 purpose of educating and engaging concerned individuals and churches with the needs and
61 activities of farm workers; and
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63 FINALLY, BE IT RESOLVED that the DFWM establish a budget for its work seeking funds to
64 support the work of its ministry. All funds will be received through DHM for appropriate
65 accountability of reporting and expending.
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68 Compton Heights Christian Church, St. Louis, Missouri
69 Downey Avenue Christian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana
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71 **BACKGROUND**

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73 There are over two million farm workers in the United States who labor in our fields and
74 orchards, dairies and feedlots. Without them, our multi-billion dollar agricultural industry
75 would not survive; 85 percent of our fruits and vegetables are still handpicked. Yet farm
76 workers annual wages are only \$11, 000, with some workers making much less. Workers often
77 pick for “piece rate” still earning only 45 cents per 32 lb bucket of tomatoes, or 85 cents per 90
78 lb sack of oranges. The majority receive no health benefits, overtime pay, or sick leave.
79 Thousands of workers experience pesticide related illnesses every year and suffer other
80 unhealthy and unsanitary conditions in the fields, even dying in the fields from heat exposure.
81 Women frequently suffer sexual harassment. Most farm workers are immigrants and many lack
82 legal status, leaving them vulnerable to being fired or deported if they complain about abuses.
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84 Churches have worked cooperatively with farm workers for over 80 years, first as state based
85 ministries, providing food, clothing, daycare and worship services to workers. When Cesar
86 Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, began organizing in the 1960’s he called on the
87 church to move from charity to justice, to support their organizing efforts for empowerment
88 and justice in the fields – for the means to buy their own food and clothes. In 1971, the
89 National Farm Workers Ministry (NFWM) was founded as the vehicle for national
90 denominations, regional religious bodies, religious orders, and concerned individuals to
91 respond to that call. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was a founding member of
92 NFWM.
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94 While supporting important legislative and regulatory efforts led by farm workers, such as the
95 right to shade and drinking water in extreme heat, the biggest improvements in farm worker
96 working conditions have come about through labor agreements. National Farm Worker
97 Ministry's 36 years of service with farm workers has convinced them that such agreements are
98 the workers' best hope for real change in the fields, enabling enforcement of laws and
99 regulations within the industry, making it possible for workers to speak up without fear of being
100 fired.

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102 Under the leadership of Arturo Rodriguez, Cesar Chavez's successor as President of the United
103 Farm Workers (UFW), the UFW won contracts over the last ten years with: the nation's largest
104 strawberry employer, Coastal Berry Company; a major rose company, Jackson and Perkins; the
105 D'Arrigo company, employing over 1800 workers who pick lettuce, broccoli and other
106 vegetables; the majority of California's mushroom companies; and several others. They also
107 won contracts with Chateau St. Michelle, Washington's largest winery and have successfully
108 renegotiated that three times. The UFW also won the largest contract for farm workers in
109 Oregon history covering three hundred workers at the mega-dairy Threemile Canyon Farms.
110 These agreements provide workers not only with improved pay and working conditions, such
111 as toilets and clean drinking water in the fields, but also with a pension plan, sick and vacation
112 days, health benefits, and perhaps most importantly, a seniority system and grievance
113 procedure to address problems on the job.

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115 The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) under the leadership of Baldemar Velasquez won
116 the first union contract for farm workers in North Carolina and the first contract covering H2-A
117 guest workers. Some 7,000 cucumber, sweet potato and tobacco pickers won protections
118 under the landmark agreement with the North Carolina Growers Association and Mt. Olive
119 Pickle Company in 2004; that contract was extended in 2008. Among the contract provisions
120 the "guest workers" won a right to bereavement leave to return home for a death in the family.
121 The contract has also helped prevent further death in North Carolina's fields where some nine
122 workers died in recent years, some of preventable heat stroke.

123
124 In Florida, a community organization known as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) won
125 historic agreements with Taco Bell, McDonald's, and Burger King, when the fast food
126 companies agreed to pay a penny more per pound for their tomatoes with the provision that it
127 be passed on to the workers picking their tomatoes. The Coalition was also given a role in
128 enforcing a code of conduct in the fields, particularly related to the indentured servitude that
129 still exists in Florida and elsewhere.

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131 Farm workers were excluded from many of the laws protecting other workers, including the
132 National Labor Relations act, designed to provide workers protections for organizing. Thus they
133 have only won agreements such as those above with public support. The support of the faith
134 community in particular has been critical because of its moral voice, its large constituency, and
135 because its presence offers the workers hope and affirmation for the risks they take.

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137 Farm workers are the first to say that they could not have won what they have without the
138 support of the religious community. But the sad reality is that they apply to a minority of farm
139 workers nationwide; there is much work to be done before we can rest easy at our tables. It is

140 imperative that people of faith continue to stand by farm workers as they carry on with hope
141 and determination to create a better life for themselves and their families.

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143 **THE ROLE OF THE DISCIPLES**

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145 The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was an active participant in this ministry from the
146 beginning. Individuals from congregations have worked as volunteers with migrants, and our
147 church was among the denominations which founded the National Farm Workers Ministry in
148 1971. The International Convention and the General Assembly have consistently endorsed and
149 encouraged this ministry with farm workers.

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151 In 1966, the International Convention approved Resolution No. 75 entitled Concerning
152 Economic Justice For Agricultural Workers saying: "... scripture enjoins us to be concerned with
153 justice for the poor, the stranger and the oppressed." Citing Amos 2:6-8 and 5:21-24, Micah
154 6:10-15, and James 5:1-6, Resolution No. 75 said: "that this Assembly go on record as
155 supporting the principal of legislation to include farm workers under the provisions of the
156 National Labor Relations Act of the United States and the Industrial Relations and Disputes
157 Investigation Act of Canada so that they may form voluntary associations and bargain
158 collectively with their employers; and that this Assembly urges that the permanent church
159 related migrant ministry staffs... be encouraged to solicit the cooperation of local churches and
160 parish clergy to assume their rightful responsibility of farm laborers to achieve dignity and an
161 adequate standard of living...."

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163 In 1973, in Resolution No. 7343, the General Assembly meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio, reaffirmed
164 support for the right of farm workers "... to organize and join a union of their own choosing and
165 to engage in collective bargaining with employers." and "...that regional offices of the Christian
166 Church (Disciples of Christ) be requested to assist in the task of helping members of churches to
167 understand the issues involved in the right of farm workers to organize for and engage in
168 collective bargaining with employers."

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170 In 1975, the General Assembly meeting in San Antonio approved Resolution No. 7556 which
171 called on "units, agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Christian Church (Disciples of
172 Christ) to refrain from purchasing or serving iceberg (head lettuce) or table grapes or Gallo
173 wines unless they bear the UFW Aztec eagle label."

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175 Resolution No. 0314 was approved by the General Assembly meeting in Charlotte, North
176 Carolina, in 2003 calling for express endorsement of the National Farm Worker Ministry and
177 encouraging a Disciples witness and presence in ministry with migrant and seasonal farm
178 workers. The resolution endorsed the boycott of "all Taco Bell restaurants and products (taco
179 shells, sauce, refried beans, etc.) sold in groceries until such time when Taco Bell brings
180 together representatives of Taco Bell, their Florida suppliers and representatives of Immokalee
181 workers to discuss solutions to the needs and rights of immigrant workers." This boycott was
182 successful in getting Taco Bell to sign an agreement with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers
183 (CIW) of South Florida which was the first for a fast food company.

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185 Most recently, the General Assembly meeting in Portland, Oregon, in 2005, approved
186 Resolution No. 0517 that called on church members to "...support movements that address the

187 living wage and cooperate with workers, employers, labor unions, and organizations that are
188 working to affirm workers' dignity.”

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The General Board recommends that the General Assembly
ADOPT Business Item No. 0920. (Debate time: 12 minutes)