

Standing in the Gap

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A speech given by NFWM Executive Director Virginia Nesmith in 2001 during the Farm Labor Organizing Committee's campaign with the Mt. Olive Pickle Company. The company signed an agreement with FLOC in 2004.

“The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery. They oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice. I looked for one among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it...” (Ezekiel 22:vs.29,30)

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) is in the midst of a campaign in North Carolina to organize the workers who pick cucumbers used by the Mt. Olive Pickle Company to make their products. FLOC wants Mt. Olive to use its power as a leading processor in the pickle industry to negotiate a contract with FLOC that enables the growers to improve conditions for the pickers. In a recent debate, Baldemar Velasquez, FLOC President, asked the CEO of Mt. Olive, William Bryan, to “stand in the gap”; to take this opportunity as an industry leader to stand up for the rights of the poor, the needy, the alien – the farm workers - to bridge the gap between the oppression they have suffered, and the respect and fair treatment deserved by all.

Farm workers who are organizing across the country ask those of us who fill our churches, synagogues, mosques and meeting halls, to do the same – to stand with them and fill the gap in their struggle for justice. They ask us first to be mindful of that gap. “Every time”, said United Farm Worker founder Cesar Chavez, “you sit at a table at night or in the morning to enjoy the fruits and vegetables from our good earth, remember that they come from the work of men, women and children who have been exploited for generations.” But as farm workers organize, they don't ask us for charity to help end that exploitation and improve their lives. They ask instead for solidarity as they work to win and enforce those improvements themselves. As farm workers challenge the power that agribusiness holds on local, state and federal levels, they don't ask us for mediation. They ask us to lend the weight of our convictions and our power as consumers to balance the scales so that they have a place at the table where true reconciliation can happen.

They ask us not for words but for deeds - to put our faith into action: to write letters, visit legislators, organize delegations to store managers. They ask us to march at capitols and company headquarters, to raise funds for striking workers, to challenge growers, to promote boycotts, and to stand with them on the picket line. They ask us to stretch, and accomplish along with them, more than we ever thought possible.

They ask us to sacrifice with them. Farm workers face intimidation and retaliation and risk their jobs, their housing, their physical safety and their relationships with co-workers whenever they speak up. They ask us to share in those risks: to risk confrontation with people of good will in our congregations, to sacrifice the comfort of the ambiguity enabled by ceaselessly examining the issue, and to give up the neutrality that enables

those in power to stay in power. They remind us that God has clearly called us to cast our option with the poor.

God could not find anyone in Ezekiel's time to stand in the gap. Today, as we become aware of the suffering experienced by those who harvest our food, we become uncomfortable at our tables. As we get involved with them in their struggle for self-determination and empowerment, we disrupt the careful ways we have organized our lives. As we commit with them to that struggle for the long haul, we awaken a spirit deep within - a spirit of patience, courage, and hope that brings out the best in us, and enables us, together, to stand in the gap.