

**NFWM**

***75 YEARS  
OF  
FARM WORKER  
MINISTRY***

***1920 - 1995***

## NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Farm Worker Ministry expresses its appreciation to the following individuals and organizations:

The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, for its generous assistance in providing for the printing of this anniversary book;

Ms. Margie Halliwell, for her expert help with computer input and layout;

All those in the farm worker ministry family who have contributed their written memories to this project; and

All of the photographers, acknowledged and unknown, who through the years have provided us with a visual history of the farm worker struggle.



### A Note to the Reader

The intent in preparing this anniversary book was to gather some of the rich memories and reflections of the staff, Board members and supporters of the National Farm Worker Ministry and its predecessor organizations. Should you like to explore a more detailed history of farm worker ministry, we refer you to the following excellent resources, available through NFWM, 1337 West Ohio Street, Chicago, IL 60622:

Grapes of Conflict by Sydney D. Smith, Hope Publishing House, 1987, 142 pages.

Ministry of the Dispossessed: Learning from the Farm Worker Movement by Pat Hoffman, Wallace Press, 1987, 136 pages.

## THE CHURCH SHOULD BE THERE

The year was 1973. It was a Friday. I received a call from The Rev. Chris Hartmire, Executive Director of the National Farm Worker Ministry, based in California. I was Executive Director of Agricultural Missions, Inc., in New York. Both agencies were related to the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Chris said, "I'm calling on behalf of César Chávez, President of the United Farm Workers. The workers are striking in the Coachella Valley for the right to bargain in good faith with grape growers. The grapes are ripe for harvest. Goons are being called in from Los Angeles to break the strike. They threaten violence on Monday unless the strike is called off. We think the church should be present. Can you be there?"

I was. I flew to Los Angeles on Sunday, drove to Coachella and checked into a motel. I tried to sleep wondering what tomorrow would bring. I had never seen a strike, much less taken part in one. Morning came. While it was yet dark, I drove to the park in Coachella passing the parking lot where burly truck drivers were being issued ball bats and chains to break the strike, and break Mexican heads if necessary.

In the park, workers were gathering, whole families of them. Having been a missionary in Latin America, I could understand what they were saying to each other. They were afraid. So was I. But, they were also determined to achieve their rightful goal of fair wages and healthy working conditions in the fields. We had coffee, had prayer and were assigned to the various ranches where the strike had been in progress for days.

What I had not expected happened. Among us there in the park were 90 delegates from the United Church of Christ's Ninth Synod Meeting in St. Louis. They had been commissioned the day before to accompany the farm workers on this day. The church had chartered a plane to Ontario, California, to bring them there. For the workers, for all of us, it was like an answer to prayer: pastors in their clerical collars, lay men and women, church executives and officers of the denomination. Standing with farm workers in their struggle for justice.

By daybreak we were at the farm to which we'd been assigned, along with workers, church members and friends marching back and forth. Strike breakers, standing in the edge of the vineyard across the road, hurled angry epithets (not fit to print) at us. Police cars patrolled the space between us. César Chávez and his family were also on the picket line.

There I saw, in the eyes of Hispanic workers, hope and self-esteem like I had never experienced in my work among landless workers in Latin America. These were organized. Violence was averted, negotiations began and, eventually, contracts were signed.

Back in New York, I reported to the church leaders who made up the Board of Agricultural Missions, Inc., which voted to become a full member of the National Farm Worker Ministry, along with many other Catholic and Protestant church organizations. Being present with farm workers in their struggle for justice has changed the church. It has changed my life. Thanks be to God!

The Rev. Benton Rhoades  
President, NFWM Board of Directors

Greetings and best wishes to all on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the National Farm Worker Ministry. It was my great pleasure to be associated with the Ministry through service on the Board from 1975 to 1981, as the representative of the Sisters of Loretto. During that time, I came to know and love and appreciate the wonderful work of the NFWM through its dedicated staff and Board.

I especially wish to commend those of you who have stood by the Ministry for the long haul. As I look over the names of the Anniversary Committee and other honorary members, I recognize many friends on the list. I recall trudging with you through the farms and fields of California, Florida, Texas and Ohio. This was a group that met challenges head on! No comfortable, cozy boardrooms for this group! I don't think I have ever been part of a more active, involved and committed Board. I was always proud that the Church was present with farm workers wherever they were struggling for justice. I am pleased that that presence continues.

¡Viva La Causa!

Mary Catherine Rabbitt, S.L., J.D.

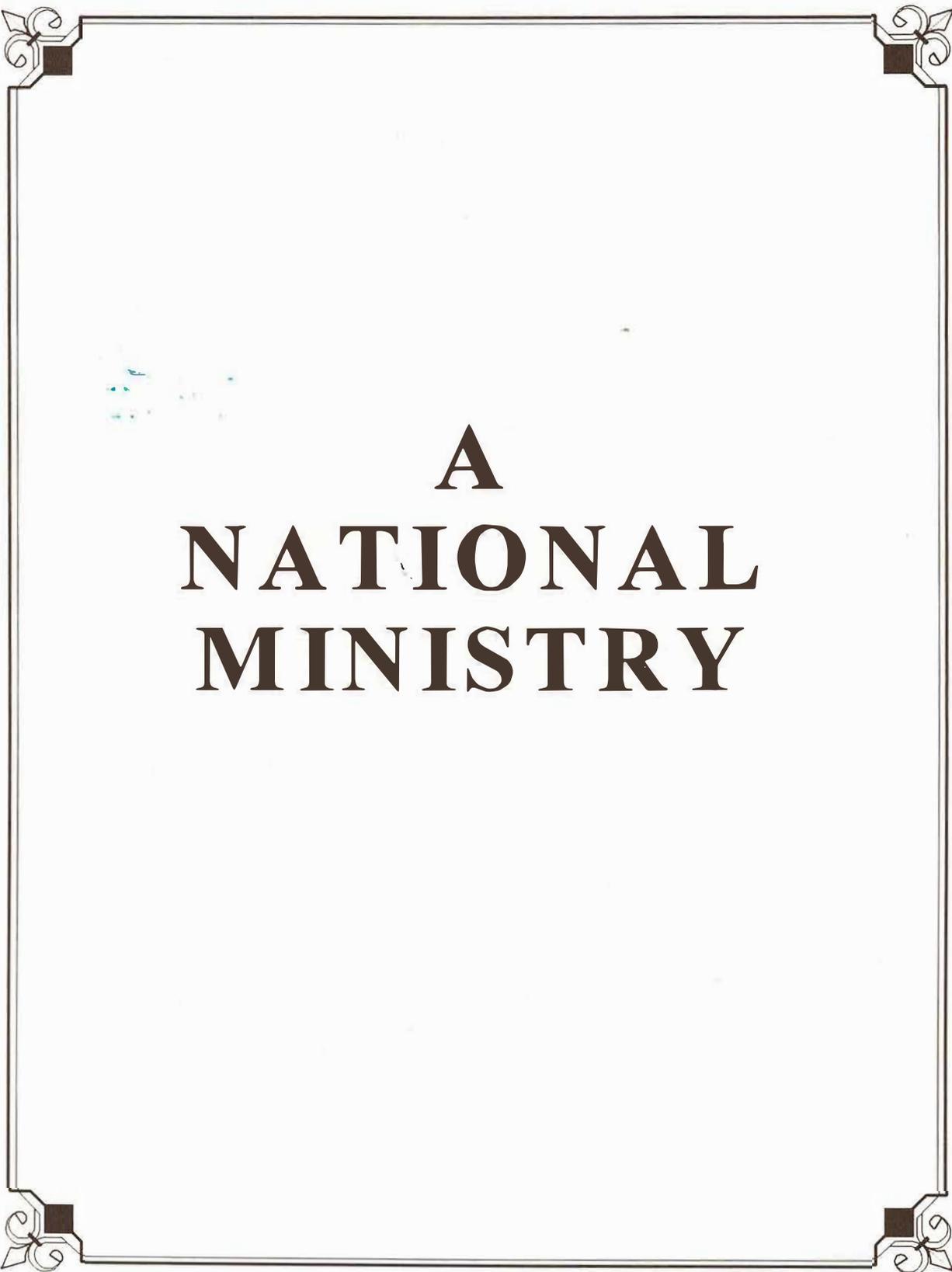
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PATRICIA DRYDYK AND CIPRIANO FERREL, ¡PRESENTE!



**A  
NATIONAL  
MINISTRY**

## EARLY DAYS

*It all began innocently enough with a survey in 1920, commissioned by the Council of Women for Home Missions. The survey looked at the lives and working conditions of Polish, Italian and black migrants on the East Coast. Here is what it found:*

*"Twenty thousand people, chiefly foreign-born women, accompanied by large numbers of infants and children. . . are picking fruit on truck farms or working in canneries. While the mothers are working, the children are uncared for. The present proposal is to send some experienced and sensible young woman to work with these people."*

*The survey had results: Four day care centers were established that year in Delaware, New Jersey, and Maryland. . . .*

*The twenties were a period of increasing prosperity for the country, but migrant farm workers lived and worked under the same hard, dangerous conditions. By 1928 the organization's work had expanded to include the establishment of "Kiddie Kamps" for fruit pickers in Oregon, and medical care for Mexican cotton pickers in California's Imperial Valley.*

*That year a woman named Edith Lowry became the head of the migrant project. She was to serve for the next 33 years as the guiding force behind the Migrant Ministry. . . . By 1932 the Migrant Ministry had projects in Colorado, Arkansas, Connecticut, and New York. The work soon expanded to Florida and Texas. Dust bowl conditions in the mid-thirties forced new millions of small farmers and their families into the migrant life, and by the end of the decade the Migrant Ministry's programs included operations in 50 different migrant areas.*

*Farm workers were excluded when other American workers were given the right to organize and bargain collectively under the Wagner Act of 1936. The Migrant Ministry's objectives in the forties included educating public opinion, improving living and work standards, and arousing communities and employers to a sense of their responsibilities.*

*By the end of the fifties, strong social forces were at work in America. The national awareness of inequalities, and the fight for civil rights would have a major effect on migrants and on the Migrant Ministry. The change started in the California Migrant Ministry under Dean Collins, and continued under the leadership of Doug Still. . . . It was a struggle that was long in coming. . . .*

*Excerpt from "This Far By Faith," NFWM 60th anniversary slide presentation*

**REV. JON REGIER:**

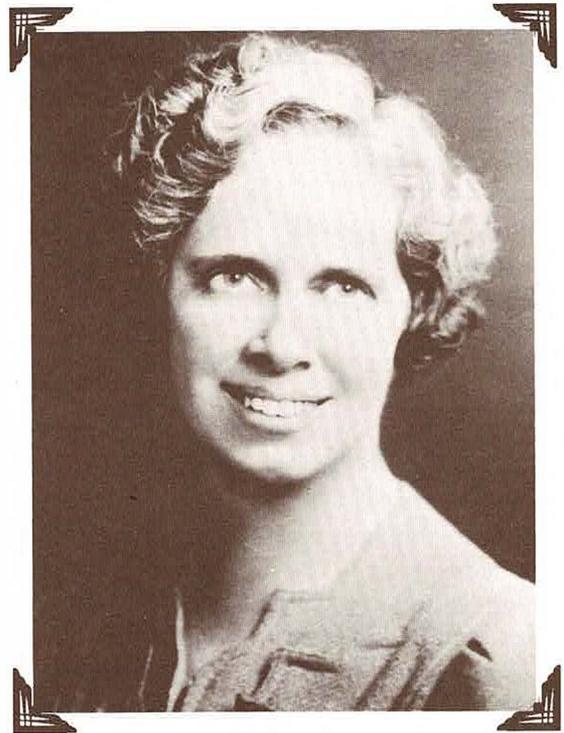
*The Migrant Ministry grew out of Protestant women attending a League of Nations conference on the conditions of women around the world. The plight of migrant women in other countries opened their eyes to the needs of migrant women and children in the United States. The World Day of Prayer and its offerings were started to interpret the needs of women and children in the migrant streams and to support programs meeting those needs.*

*In September 1958, I left an exciting inner city ministry in Chicago to go to New York to be the Executive Director of the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. During the interview process, I became acquainted with a most remarkable woman, Edith Lowry.*

*When I asked Edith why she [having served in one of the two executive positions that were now being merged] would not be the new Executive, she explained that if the cause of justice for the migrants was to be taken seriously in the present political climate, a man was needed. Unfortunately, she was right, for the Protestant church was a bona fide 'Old Boys' operation.*

*Edith brought professional day care to migrant children through the employment of Monica Owen. Strong operational committees managed the Ministry in 40 states, with leadership from field staff. Edith used the Church Women United network, superbly making progress in providing tools, equipment and transportation for program and staff. Elizabeth Harrington, a political activist of the YWCA, and Edith Lowry had become good friends by the time I came to the scene. Elizabeth was most helpful as our efforts moved into the national arena.*

*From my first day on the job, Edith kept my feet to the fire on staff needs and development as well as problems of increased costs due to growth. To move the national interests nearer to 'the field,' Edith had established three regional directors: the Rev. Dean Collins on the West Coast, the*



Edith Lowry

*Rev. William Scholes in the Central region, and Edith in the Eastern area. Our Division was the poor stepchild of the NCC. This was exemplified in our obsolete, broken-down equipment and cruddy offices on Fourth Avenue in New York City. In the minds of many, our only viable programs were our Town and Country Churches, the Urban Church and the Church Building and Architecture departments. I can still hear Edith saying, "Jon, we have to find ways to make migrant work important to other people." Two things were classic Edith: 1) to stress a point, she started the sentence with your name, and 2) that which was important happened in 'the field.'*

*In an early staff meeting, Edith, with a cheer leader's enthusiasm, asked how we could make the Migrant Ministry more visible. Louisa Shotwell, the Division's staff person for mission interpretation, said it was time to personalize the Ministry. The charming book Roosevelt O'Grady was Louisa's contribution, as were numerous articles.*

*Urban Church Executive Meryl Ruoss suggested that we get TV coverage, so I approached the Broadcasting and Film*

Commission. "Migrants, forget it! Now if you want to talk about something like inner-city ministry, great." God has mysterious ways, her wonders to perform! I began working on Urban Issues with Bruno Krocher of the BFC and a wonderful woman, Pam Ilaf of the CBS staff. I arranged for Pam to meet Edith, who explained the incredible network of Migrant Ministry women, Church Women United, and the interest of the 40 State Councils. We never did a Migrant program, but some months later Edward R. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame" appeared on CBS from seemingly nowhere. We later learned that it had been in the can and had not been shown because the lawyers thought it too controversial.

The impact energized the troops all over the nation. Edith forged an excellent relationship with Senator Harrison (Pete) Williams, Senate Labor Committee chair. She suggested that it was time to get the White House involved. Thanks to the help of Senator Williams, Elizabeth Harrington and some friends in the labor movement, President Eisenhower set up a national Migrant Advisory body.

In the newly built 'God Box,' Edith and I had adjacent offices. On a regular basis, she would bounce in with another idea. For the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Migrant Ministry, we decided to do a one-year study. The process would begin with the migrants and concerned local people, and would culminate in a national conference in Washington. That conference resulted in the "Goals For the Next Decade," the most significant of which was to assist migrants in organizing to exercise their right of self-determination.

Edith was also concerned about replacing West Coast director Dean Collins, who'd left before I came on board. Edith, Bill Scholes and I decided to have Bill move to Denver, still covering the Midwest and Coast, and to hire a director for the California Migrant Ministry. At the next Division Board meeting, Edith asked me to meet a young man soon to graduate from Union Theological Seminary, who she and Bill thought would make a good CMM director.

That morning my mind wandered back to my high schools in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. I thought of my friends, children of the managers of corporate mega-farms developed when other friends' farms were foreclosed by the banks. I knew the toughness and brutality of these corporations. In the depression days, we five preacher's kids worked in the fields and sheds. Migrants, streams and shanty camps were no strangers to us.

We had a delightful lunch. Chris Hartmire was most impressive. On the way back to the meeting, I told Edith and Bill that I really liked Chris, but that he was too inexperienced for the job and would be chewed up by the corporations. Bill, in his quiet way, was very clear in telling me that I was wrong about Chris. Edith confirmed Bill's opinion. Chris was hired, and the rest is history--'O what fools we mortals be.'

Shortly after this, Edith Lowry, daughter of famous Baptist minister and hymn writer Robert Lowry, was laid to rest in the Lowry plot in a cemetery in Plainfield, NJ, the home of her lifetime. Though it was a most local occasion, her national impact was recognized: a few migrants and Senator Williams with tears in their eyes quietly slipped into the service and waved goodbye at her grave side. I can still see the Senator standing quietly after others left, watching the cemetery people fill in the grave. Soon after, the Senator took sick leave from the Senate, re-emerging a year later and addressing the Migrant Ministry in his first national appearance as a recovering alcoholic. The Migrant Ministry has ministered to many of us who don't work in 'the fields.'



From left: Monica Owen, Edith Lowry, Louisa Shotwell, Bill Scholes

**REV. BILL SCHOLES:**

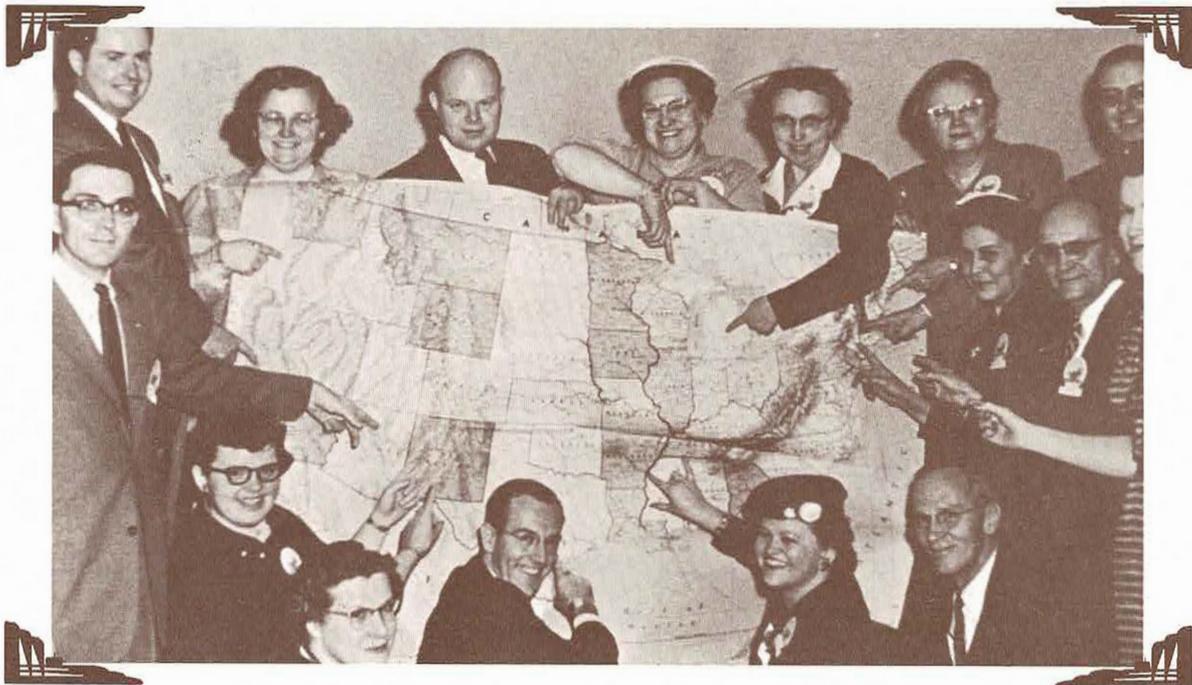
*After 21 years of responsibility in the Migrant Ministry, it is difficult to sort out remembrances. When I began with the Migrant Ministry back in 1952, Edith Lowry was National Director of "Migrant Work." She had previously been the executive of the Council of Women for Home Missions. [It was this Council that in 1920 established four migrant day care centers in New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware, and went on to sponsor migrant programs in other states.] Under the newly formed National Council of Churches they were joined with the Home Mission Council of North America to form the NCC Division of Home Missions.*

*Edith had for some years been interested in and involved with the need for child care and education for children of migratory workers in the fields of New Jersey. Soon the interest spread up and down the East Coast, to California, and into Texas and Michigan. She was at first concerned only with direct services, but as the years passed, more and more of her time was spent trying to get the story out.*

*Edith convinced people of influence to lobby their legislators to write and sponsor legislation for the extension of Social Security benefits and child labor laws to include seasonal agricultural workers, for the funding of the Migrant Health Act under the Surgeon General, for the education of migrant children, for crew leader registration, etc. Her major efforts, beyond direct service, were in the field of legislation.*

*Because the earliest efforts were supported by the interest of church women in Home Missions, it was natural that, as the work grew, it was most often funded and supported locally by United Church Women.*

*When I began, there were three administrative divisions, following the East, Central, and West Coast migrant streams. I directed the Central region. Each region had a permanent staff who moved with the migration from Florida to the Carolinas, to New Jersey and north; from Texas to Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, with some into the western stream as far north as Oregon; and from Southern California north into Oregon and Washington. As staff moved, they*



Directors of Migrant Ministry point to states where they work. Clockwise from top left: Doug Still, Betty Whitaker, Bill Scholes, Dortha Weaver, Mildred Gladstone, Paul Cassen, Cassandra Stockburger, Bob Sandman, Bill Koeh Jr.

**HELEN JOHNSTON:**

*I well remember Edith Lowry and Monica Owen, two people who helped initiate me to the situation of agricultural migrants and their families. During the 1950's, I was working as part of a 3-member staff to a Public Health Service Inter-Bureau Committee on Migratory Labor. The chairman was Lucile Petry, the chief nurse officer of the USPHS. Lucile encouraged my participation in meetings of the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor. Here I met with Edith Lowry, Monica Owen and others associated with what was then called the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches. Their objective was to build bridges between local communities and migrant families who lived in the community during the crop season.*

*Edith Lowry and Monica Owen were among the advocates of an expanded Public Health Service effort on behalf of agricultural migrants. This finally led to the passage of the Migrant Health Act in 1962. Church leaders in various parts of the United States promoted the development of local migrant*

*health service units, located in church basements or other temporary quarters, serving migrant workers and their families, usually at night, for the duration of their stay.*

*The initial appropriation for migrant health for the entire United States was \$750,000. This meant that health care was often provided by physicians and nurses who volunteered their services one or two nights a week in temporary facilities located in or near labor camps. One such facility with heavy involvement of Migrant Ministry leaders used a small donated mobile health unit. Noting its size, the local Migrant Ministry staff member said facetiously, "When the doctor lost his toupee, they had wall-to-wall carpeting!"*

*Without the assistance of the Migrant Ministry nationwide, it would have been impossible for the Migrant Health Program to get started as quickly as it did. The Program was expanded to serve other seasonal farm workers as well as migrants, and has become a program largely controlled by the people served. Thus it continues today. ■*



Monica Owen (kneeling) introduced child-centered program equipment for "Harvesters" (Photo: Bob Sandman)