

Resolution in Support of Ongoing Partnership Work with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Campaign for Fair Food

Submitted to the 217th General Assembly (2006)

By the Advocacy Committee for Racial and Ethnic Concerns

God Has Created a World Where There is Enough for Everyone

God has created a world in which there is enough for everyone to live and thrive (Genesis 1). Walter Brueggemann, biblical scholar of the Old (First) Testament insists that the “beginning point for God...is the wonder and goodness of creation,” and that creation itself is an “exuberant, lyrical, doxological expression of gratitude and amazement for the goodness and generosity of God. The theme that recurs is generosity and abundance. There is enough! There is more than enough!”ⁱ

However, most Florida farmworkers picking tomatoes are earning sub-poverty wages. According to the Department of Labor, their wage (40-45 cents per 32 pound bucket) has remained stagnant for more than twenty-five years and their median annual income (\$7,500) is below poverty level.ⁱⁱ In addition to sub-poverty wages, farmworkers work 10-12 hour days in pesticide-laden fields, have no right to overtime pay, no sick leave, no benefits, and no right to organize. Some farmworkers are held in modern-day slavery: they are held against their will and forced to work, often in isolated labor camps, receive little or no pay, are watched by guards, and endure actual violence or threats of violence.ⁱⁱⁱ

Presbyterians confess that “life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage. People are free to seek life within the purpose of God: to develop and protect the resources of nature for the common welfare, to work for justice and peace in society, and in other ways to use their creative powers for the fulfillment of human life” (*Confession of 1967*, PC(USA), 9.17).

We are Stewards of God’s Creation

Created in God’s image, the Divine has appointed us stewards of creation which includes our economic life. Such stewardship involves discernment and decision-making such that our words and actions reflect our belief in God’s sovereignty and good purpose for creation. “God alone is to be obeyed. Christians are first to ask of the economic system not whether it is most efficient or productive of economic goods, as important as that is, but how it reflects the purpose of God for creation” (*Christian Faith and Economic Justice*, PC(USA), 1984, 29.081).

Mexican, Guatemalan and Haitian farmworkers came together in 1993 to form the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to address sub-poverty wages and violence in the fields. Recognizing they faced numerous barriers to achieving their goals because of race, ethnicity, and immigrant status, the farmworkers not only joined together, they also reached out to the religious community. Soon after, they were awarded a Self Development of People grant through the Peace River Presbytery (where Immokalee is located). Unlike other workers in other industries, farmworkers are explicitly excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, so the growers that employ them are under no legal obligation to dialogue with them. Local Presbyterians in the Peace River and Tampa Bay presbyteries accompanied the farmworkers during work stoppages, marches, and hunger-strikes that drew attention to the exploitative conditions in the fields. While through these actions the CIW was able to end violence in the fields of the Immokalee, Florida region, the sub-poverty wages and terrible working conditions persisted.

The Church shall Promote Social Righteousness

As Presbyterians, we affirm that “the promotion of social righteousness” is one of the great ends of the church. (FG 33.04). Therefore, the Church is called to correct, in its own life and in the life of the world, practices and systems that exploit humanity or nature. We are reminded that as Christians “We are not only to share our resources individually with one another; we are to help fashion institutions which foster justice and well-being in the community” (*Christian Faith and Economic Justice*, PC(USA), 1984, 29.132).

As Florida Presbyterians accompanied the farmworkers, they and the workers grew to believe that significant change could realistically be achieved by approaching the problem from the top of the agri-food industry supply chain – not only with the growers, but with the grower’s clients, retail food buyers like fast food companies and groceries, who profited from worker exploitation in the form of low-cost tomatoes.^{iv}

Our Consumer Decisions Bear Witness to and Serve God and God’s World

As Christians who are also consumers in the marketplace we have a particular responsibility to ensure that our decisions, to purchase or refrain from purchasing goods and services, build rather than diminish, the well-being of humanity and the earth, particularly because these practices are expressions of our faith. “...Our consumer decisions should be shaped by our beliefs, should translate or be a ‘sign’ of those beliefs in the world of commerce. Christians understand this in terms of stewardship, our responsibility to use possessions as witness to and in service of the Lord of the Church and the world.” (*Boycotts: Policy Analysis and Criteria*, General Assembly Mission Council, UPC(USA), 1979, p. ix)

To this end, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor bodies have, at various times, engaged in consumer boycotts. Some examples include:

- ◆ a boycott of those products made by child labor (1937),
- ◆ a boycott of public accommodations that discriminate because of race (1960),
- ◆ a boycott of table grapes in support of the UFW (1973),
- ◆ a boycott of Nestle Corporation for promoting infant formula in the developing world where its preparation endangered the lives of infants (1978),
- ◆ a boycott of J.P. Steven’s Corporation for deliberately precluding workers’ right to organize (1979),
- ◆ a boycott of Taco Bell restaurants and products to establish socially responsible purchasing practices by the fast-food corporation and end the exploitation of farmworkers in the company’s tomato supply-chain (2002).

The CIW discovered that Taco Bell was a major purchaser of tomatoes from Immokalee, Florida. When Taco Bell did not respond to multiple letters and phone calls requesting that they address exploitation among their tomato suppliers, the workers called for a consumer boycott of Taco Bell in 2001. The Tampa Bay Presbytery brought an overture to support the Taco Bell Boycott to the 214th General Assembly in 2002 where it was approved.

Many Presbyterians and congregations prayed, fasted, wrote letters, protested, and provided hospitality or material support to the Coalition as they sought to establish socially responsible purchasing by Yum! Brands, Taco Bell’s parent company, based in Louisville, and the largest fast food company in the world.^v Over the almost three years that the PC(USA) participated in the boycott, the Office of the Stated Clerk and the Coordinator of the Boycott convened several rounds of talks between executives of Yum! Brands and the CIW.

In March 2005, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers reached a precedent-setting agreement with Yum! Brands which established

- ◆ the first-ever direct, ongoing payment by a fast-food industry leader to farmworkers in its supply chain to address sub-standard farm labor wages (nearly doubling wages for farmworkers that harvest for Taco Bell’s Florida suppliers);
- ◆ the first-ever enforceable Code of Conduct for agricultural suppliers in the fast-food industry (including the naming of the CIW, a worker-based organization, as an investigative body for monitoring worker complaints);
- ◆ Market incentives for agricultural suppliers willing to respect their workers’ rights, even when those rights are not guaranteed by law;
- ◆ 100% transparency for Taco Bell’s tomato purchases in Florida (Yum! Brands has committed to provide records of their tomato purchasing to the CIW in order for the workers to monitor the agreement).

Further Yum! Brands agreed to work together with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to promote the principles established in the agreement throughout the retail food industry. The General Assembly Council and the Office of the Stated Clerk have publicly commended Yum! Brands and the CIW on this landmark victory for human rights.

In our Christian Vocation and the Covenant of Work We Shall Bless Our Neighbors and Uphold Mutual Responsibility

The Scots Confession speaks of engaging in work that honors God and is “to the profit of our neighbor... The works that profit our neighbor include to save the lives of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed... to deal justly with all... in word and deed, and finally, to repress any desire to harm our neighbor... and these are most pleasing and acceptable to God... Acts to the contrary are sins. (Scots Confession, Chapter XIV, 3.14)

In 1995 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) produced a statement on vocation and work entitled *God’s Work in Our Hands* which reminds us that the covenant of work entails “mutual responsibility between employers and employees, producers and consumers... None of us works independently. Employees, employers, and customers need each other, depend upon each other, and owe each other help beyond the letter of the law... Our partners in work, even when we cannot see them or know them personally, deserve our respect and our attention to their needs” (*God’s Work in Our Hands*, p. 10, 1995). Further, “all sectors of society – including labor, management, and government – must be engaged in the task of economic renewal of our life together. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should play a significant role as a catalyst for conversation among these sectors” (*Ibid*, p.18).

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers helped the church and consumers across the country understand how we are connected to one another and how we can work together to create systems that are more just and ensure the human rights of those who are most vulnerable. At the celebratory press conference announcing the agreement between CIW and Yum! Brands, Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, reminded the church and the wider public that “the significance of this agreement is in the promise it holds for transforming the entire fast-food industry and the responsibility it confers on each one of us as consumers to walk with CIW and Yum Brands into this future. Together we must ensure that this momentous first step charts a sure and clear path for other major fast-food buyers to follow.”^{vi}

Accordingly, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly has written to McDonald’s, Burger King, and Subway encouraging the companies to implement the principles established in the CIW-Yum! Brands agreements within their own supply chains.

As Ambassadors of Christ's Reconciling Love, the Church is Called to Challenge and Heal the World

In continuity with the Torah and in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, our savior Jesus Christ, a poor man himself, challenged the powers and principalities of his day to recognize the dignity of every person and to create communities and practices that promoted justice, dignity, and human flourishing by his teaching, healing, and example. In so doing, Christ reconciled the world to God and called us to be ambassadors of that love in action.

Through God's reconciling love, "God overcomes the barriers between sisters and brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all people to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights." (*Confession of 1967*, 9.44a, (PC(USA), 1967).

Through his birth, ministry, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ redeemed not only people and nations, but powers and principalities, that once again, God's good purpose for creation might be known. We are called to be ambassadors of Christ's reconciling love in this world, that the gospel might be known and bear fruit (*Confession of 1967*, 9.45b, (PC(USA), 1967).

The reconciliation of humankind through Jesus Christ makes it plain that enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God's good creation. Because Jesus identified himself with the needy and exploited, the cause of the world's poor is the cause of his disciples. The church calls all people to use their abilities, their possessions, and the fruits of technology as gifts entrusted to them by God for the maintenance of their families and the advancement of the common welfare...A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God. (*Confession of 1967*, 9.46c (PC(USA), 1967).

In March 2005, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers wrote a public letter to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), lifting up how the church has been a true partner in our common struggle for fair food and human rights.

Together we have achieved a historic victory for human rights for farmworkers and set a precedent for change for the entire fast-food industry...Throughout this struggle, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has worked with us, side by side. You supported the boycott, facilitated our process of negotiations with Yum Brands; you were with us in our hunger strikes, you supported the truth tours and welcomed us in your congregations; you put the words of the Bible into action. And for us as farmworkers, to see that, it is more than just the church "standing with us" in our struggle—it is about becoming people who are a part of one community, struggling together for the same goals...The church was absolutely necessary in this struggle because you have a lot of power especially in the eyes of corporations. And you had more connections with their human side. Executives of corporations are members of congregations. And farmworkers are church people also. Your ability to connect both with executives and with farmworkers as people of faith, allowed a point of encounter between worlds that were in conflict but that were able to find, in this case through the church, a reconciliation.

Because of the relationship of trust and respect developed through the boycott between the CIW and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the CIW invited the church to be founding member of the Alliance for Fair Food, which continues the work for corporate socially responsible purchasing and human rights in the agricultural industry. In September 2005, the General Assembly Council voted to become a founding member of this Alliance of religious, human rights, student, international, and community organizations that are working in partnership with the CIW.

In conjunction with other allies of the CIW, in November 2005, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church issued a public statement critiquing McDonald's public refusal to implement the important principles of accountability, transparency achieved in the CIW-Yum! Brands agreement within its own supply chain and its resistance to working with the CIW. In continuity with the church's public witness on fair food, the Office of the Stated Clerk continues to call upon all retail food corporations to ensure the human rights of farmworkers in their supply chains.

In light of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s theology and practice, Therefore Be It Resolved that the 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

- a. **Reaffirm the use of consumer action (e.g. boycotts, public protest) in the struggle for economic justice, and**
- b. **Acknowledge that such action may be called for in the ongoing Campaign for Fair Food, and**
- c. **Authorize the General Assembly Council to approve Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) participation in such consumer actions if it is taken in accord with existing Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) criteria and in concert with our partners in the Alliance for Fair Food, and**
- d. **Promote this resolution through preaching, education, and participation in the Campaign for Fair Food by all settings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) through periodic mailings to congregations and the use of resources available on www.pcusa.org/fairfood.**

- ⁱ “The Truth of Abundance: Relearning Dayenu,” in Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self*, Patrick Miller, ed., Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999, p. 108.
- ⁱⁱ *Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS): A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers*. U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Office of Program Economics, Research Report No. 8. March 2000.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See “Nobodies,” by John Bowe (April 21-28, 2003 edition of the New Yorker Magazine) on modern day slavery in the Florida fields and corporate food purchasing. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has worked with the Justice Department and the FBI to prosecute six cases of slavery in recent years and freed more than one thousand slaves. Slavers have served time in prison. However slavery continues to flourish in the agricultural industry. “Others at a higher level of the fruit picking industry seem complicit in one way or another with how these activities occur,” US District Judge K. Michael Moore said while handing down the sentences in the Ramos slavery case in 2003 (Palm Beach Post, 11/21/03).
- ^{iv} Oxfam America reports “Whereas in 1990 grower-shippers received 41% of the retail price of tomatoes, by 2000 they were receiving barely one quarter...Squeezed by buyers of their produce, growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farmworkers they employ. Many farmers view their labor expenses as the only area where they are able to make significant cuts.” (*Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture*, Oxfam America, 2004, p.35).
- ^v Yum! Brands owns Taco Bell, KFC, Pizza Hut, Long John Silver’s and A & W Restaurants.
- ^{vi} “Agreement reached between the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and Yum Brands: *Stated Clerk calls for end to Taco Bell boycott*,” Released March 7, 2005, delivered March 8, 2005 at press conference.