

# MINISTERING TO MIGRANT WORKERS

A UNITED THANK OFFERING STORY



PERHAPS IT WAS the strawberries on your breakfast table, or the potato for dinner last evening, or the beans in the casserole. Whichever it was it's a safe guess that, unless you grew it in your garden, it arrived on your table by way of "stoop labor." This is the term applied to the seasonal worker of crop harvests, the migrant.

As we carefully select the plumpest, freshest fruits and vegetables in the market we rarely wonder how they arrived in the store, just how much they will total at the check-out counter.

And speaking of totals—if someone were to try to add all the hours spent by migrant workers in harvesting the food we eat so quickly, what a colossal figure it would be. Statistics vary from 800,000 to 1,500,000. Accuracy would be impossible, since no one really knows how many persons travel here and there over the United States struggling to make a meager living by gathering the seemingly endless rows of crops.

Unlike the crops with which he works, the migrant rarely "sends down roots." He carries no house keys, invests in no home owner's insurance policy, and has no return address.

His formal education stopped at about the fourth grade, and his children are in and out of schools as the family moves on with the crop harvests.

Since he rarely has resident status in any community, he does not qualify for health and welfare services. Nor is he a voter, due to residential requirements.

He and his family are housed in substandard shacks with inadequate water and bad sanitation. They are dressed in cast-off clothing and are the victims of malnutrition.

The migrants fall roughly into three groups: newcomers to this country who have left poverty at home and have come to a "land of hope and promise"; sharecroppers and tenant farmers who have been unable to compete with mechanized farming; unskilled workers who join the migrant treks during periods of industrial inactivity.

Their racial background varies widely. Many are Spanish-speaking, or come from Negro families who live in the southern states during the winter months. Some come in on contract from Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands. Some are *braceros* from neighboring Mexico. American Indians and unskilled whites also join the seasonal circuit.

Whatever his ethnic background and in spite of the hardships, whenever the next crop is ready he will sign up with the labor contractor, pile his family into a rickety vehicle, and move on. For this is the only way he knows to provide for himself and his family. There is seldom any advancement within, or progression out of, the migrant stream.

Most migrants make about \$1,000 in a good year. Occasionally, with the help of children, the figure may reach \$3,000. From this he pays rent on the shack the family tempo-

rarily occupies, buys food and clothing, and pays bus fare or for upkeep on a rickety car.

“Why doesn’t the Federal Government do something?” we ask. It has, and is moving more and more into action, both on the national and state level, in behalf of the migrant. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (commonly called the Poverty Bill) deals specifically with migrants, especially in the areas of sanitation, day care centers, housing, and education. Many states have governors’ committees charged with the investigation of migrant conditions.

## INTERDENOMINATIONAL MINISTRY

In 1920 a committee of Churchwomen didn’t wait for the government to “do something” when they saw the conditions of the migrant camps. Backed by women’s boards from eight communions, they organized and conducted experimental migrant programs in New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland.



The services rendered to the migrants were of practical, as well as spiritual, substance. The Churchwomen ran nurseries and kindergartens, taught English, gave sanitation instruction, and encouraged daily devotional practices.

Year after year the work expanded from state to state. Recognition was shown not only of the needs of migrants, but of the problems they raised for employers and the communities near which they worked.

This work, now known as the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches of Christ, is interdenominational and the United Thank Offering is supporting this ministry with a \$15,000 grant.

Its stated purpose is: To serve men, women, and children who are "following the crops," to share the Christian faith with the migrant, and to develop in him a sense of his personal worth and responsibility; to seek to awaken the community to the opportunity and obligation of sharing equally all the protective benefits and warmth of community life; to challenge the local churches to include these seasonal neighbors in their concern and full fellowship.

The Migrant Ministry works to stimulate public concern. Many of its programs are regarded as demonstrations for pointing up needs and ways of meeting them.

Each local committee tackles the job according to the resources available and response by the community, with help from the state and national committee on migrant ministry if and when needed.

All over the country local church members are becoming sensitive to the migrant's need to be accepted into the cultural and religious life of the community. They are the ones who recognize the migrant to be a child of God and go out of their way to seek to bring him into the warmth of the Christian fellowship.

### **THOUGHTS ABOUT U.T.O. PRAYER**

It is the day of the United Thank Offering Ingathering in my parish. As I empty my box of coins into the blue envelope I read again the familiar prayer printed on the end of the box, "O Lord, our heavenly Father...." Suddenly one sentence takes on an entirely different meaning. "Guard and guide the workers in the field, and draw us into closer fellowship with them.... Accept from grateful hearts...." Yes, grateful hearts for strawberries, potatoes, beans...and the "stoop labor" that gathers them for us.

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*Our gifts to the United Thank Offering have made and will continue to make important differences to many people throughout our nation and our world.*

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