



DIVERSITY

# Freedom in the fields

## The Presbyterian-supported Campaign for Fair Food has helped free and empower thousands of enslaved farmworkers in the United States.

By Chris Herlinger

**I**t almost doesn't seem possible. But nearly 150 years after the official abolition of slavery in the United States, modern-day versions of slavery continue to exist and even flourish. Perhaps the most notable examples are found in the agricultural sector—where farmworkers toil for next to nothing and where cases of human trafficking and slavery have been prosecuted.

As of 2010 nine court cases of forced servitude had been brought by federal prosecutors—cases that involved more than a dozen employers who had exploited more than 1,600 workers. Commenting on one of these cases, Assistant U.S. Attorney Doug Molloy, a member of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Fort Myers, Fla., called the offense “slavery, plain and simple.”

“Forced labor in the 21st century is outrageous,” says Laura Germino, antislavery coordinator for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a community-based organization of more than 4,000 farmworkers in Florida that has received support from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

### Proven results

Members of the PC(USA) are playing a leading role in efforts to stop the exploitation of farmworkers—and the work is paying off, with proven results. The CIW website says the efforts have “resulted in freedom for more than a thousand tomato and orange pickers held in debt bondage, historic sentences for various agricultural employers, the development of a successful model of community-government cooperation, and the growth of an expanding base of aware and committed worker activists.”

The antislavery campaign has

used what organizers call “a unique combination of outreach, investigation and worker-to-worker counseling in order to combat already-existing slavery operations case-by-case.” In 2001 the CIW launched the Campaign for Fair Food, backed by the PC(USA) and a number of other denominations and faith groups as well as human-rights, student, community and sustainable-food organizations. The goal of the campaign is to prevent and eliminate slavery in the fields by addressing the conditions in which it flourishes.

The CIW has helped investigate and bring to trial some of the perpetrators of modern-day slavery. In 2008 Molloy co-prosecuted a case against brothers Cesar and Geovanni Navarrete, who employed tomato pickers in Florida and South Carolina. The brothers were accused of paying the workers minimal wages and driving them into debt, while simultaneously threatening physical harm if the workers left their employment before their debts

had been repaid. The Navarretes admitted to beating, threatening and locking workers in cargo trucks. They were sentenced to 12 years each in federal prison on charges that included conspiracy and holding dozens of workers in involuntary servitude.

As successful as antislavery efforts have been, the question remains: How is slavery still able to happen in 2011?

*‘Through the Campaign for Fair Food we are seeking to love our neighbors whom we do not know but whose labor makes possible our life together.’—Noelle Damico*



**DIFFICULT WORKING CONDITIONS:** Farmworkers typically labor in the fields in temperatures of 90-plus degrees under the burning sun 10–12 hours a day, 6–7 days a week.



**BACK-BREAKING TOIL:** Farmworkers are subsidizing the price of cheap produce. Paying them a penny a pound more for the tomatoes they pick is a key goal of the Campaign for Fair Food.

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“Modern-day slavery doesn’t occur in a vacuum; it flourishes in degraded work environments with poverty wages and few rights,” says a statement from the Presbyterian Hunger Program, which coordinates PC(USA) involvement in the Campaign for Fair Food. “The high-volume, low-cost purchasing practices of giant corporate buyers drive growers to hold down costs wherever

they can, which has resulted in stagnant, poverty wages for 30 years and, in the worst instances, modern-day slavery.”

Supporters of the Campaign for Fair Food insist that large food buyers (corporations in the fast-food, food-service and supermarket industries) use their power to improve conditions for farmworkers. They have called on companies to work with the CIW to pay at least an additional penny per pound to farmworkers harvesting tomatoes for their suppliers and to adopt an enforceable code of conduct to address other abuses, which includes a zero-tolerance policy for slavery.

To date, thanks to Presbyterians and others who have participated in the campaign, nine of the largest food companies in the world (Taco Bell/Yum!, McDonald’s, Burger King, Subway, Whole Foods Market, Bon Appetit, Compass, Aramark and Sodexo) have all signed fair food agreements with the CIW.

### **A tipping point**

So as outrageous as abuses have become, the good news is that forced labor can be prevented if consumers join forces with those trying to stop exploitation, says Laura Germino, who last year became the first U.S.-based recipient of the U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons Hero Award.

“We are at a tipping point where we could prevent forced labor in the agricultural industry,” says Germino. Market pressure sends a signal that consumers will not tolerate purchasing produce from companies that do not support basic human rights.

For example, following the successful prosecution of the Navarrete slavery case, all corporations that had signed fair food agreements with the CIW suspended purchases from involved growers. This was the first time in history that there had been market consequences for growers who turned a blind eye to slavery in their own fields.



**MAKING EVERY SECOND COUNT:** To load their tomatoes into a truck, workers throw their 32-pound buckets upwards about four feet. Then they run quickly back to the tomato rows, because they know that at the end of the day they will only be paid for the number of buckets picked.

This development, along with the dawning awareness of the reality and pervasiveness of modern slavery, led to a landmark agreement between the CIW and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange last November. The growers agreed to a strict code of conduct, a health and safety program, a worker-to-worker education process and a cooperative complaint resolution system that covers more than 90 percent of the Florida tomato industry.

But though progress has been made, much remains to be done. While lauding the agreement between the CIW and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, top officials of the PC(USA) also called on the nation's supermarket industry—in particular Publix, Kroger (owner of Dillons, Ralphs, Food4Less and others) and Ahold (owner of Stop & Shop, Giant and Martin's)—“to join this growing partnership of corporations, growers, farmworkers and consumers.” In their statement Gradye

Parsons, stated clerk of the General Assembly, and Linda Valentine, executive director of the General Assembly Mission Council, noted that “if fair food principles are to be fully realized for every farmworker across the industry, supermarkets must also embrace them.”

CIW leader Gerardo Reyes Chavez, an agricultural worker himself, says, “There is a problem, but there is also a solution.” And the solution is getting the support of the supermarket industry so that farmworkers are paid a better wage. Doing that, he says, would eliminate the flourishing of forced labor.

Farm laborers are, in effect, subsidizing the price of cheap produce, Chavez says. Paying laborers a penny a pound more for the tomatoes they pick—a key goal of Fair Food campaigners—would result in a minuscule price increase in the supermarket. “Consumers would not even notice this,” he says.

Karen Christensen, a regional

vice president of Whole Foods Market, concurs. A Jan. 19 article in the *New York Times* quoted her as saying, “The impact of the penny per pound is a minimal addition to our purchase. We have not seen a noticeable impact on the consumer.”

In a recent op-ed piece in the *Fort Myers News-Press*, local rabbi Bruce Diamond noted what is at stake. If farmworkers were paid an additional penny a pound for tomatoes—which is what McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King and Whole Foods have agreed to pay for tomatoes grown in Florida—a farmworker's annual earnings would rise “from the 1970s level of \$10,000 to a more livable \$17,000.” However, Diamond said, “The wage increase depends on the willingness of tomato retailers to pay that extra penny.”

“Everybody in the system has to be invested for it to work,” said Reggie Brown of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange in the *New York Times* article.



**CALLING SUPERMARKETS TO ‘DO THE RIGHT THING’:** Peaceful protests in Atlanta, Tampa and other cities this spring drew hundreds of church members, farmworkers and students, including Columbia Theological Seminary students Sara Dorrien and Will Christians, *pictured above*.

### The church’s commitment

Presbyterian involvement in the issue of farm labor abuse began in 2002 with the General Assembly’s endorsement of a boycott of Taco Bell, which resulted in a ground-breaking agreement between CIW and Yum! Brands (Taco Bell’s parent company) in 2005. The church’s role in that agreement prompted the 217th General Assembly (2006) to reaffirm the denomination’s relationship with the CIW and the Campaign for Fair Food.

The point person for these issues is Noelle Damico, the PC(USA)’s

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associate for fair food and a passionate advocate of justice for farmworkers. She helps Presbyterians find ways in their own communities to lift up the Campaign for Fair Food’s effectiveness in addressing slavery.

Last fall, for example, Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church in Naples, Fla., hosted a “Harvesting Hope” event sponsored by 19 congregations and faith groups to draw attention to the issues of forced labor and modern-day slavery. The event showcased the Campaign for Fair Food and the importance of the work the CIW is doing in the Naples community’s own backyard. (Naples is 40 minutes from Immokalee.)

Presbyterian congregations from Naples to New Jersey have hosted the CIW’s Florida Modern-Day Slavery Museum, a traveling exhibit featuring a replica of the truck in which farmworkers were held in the Navarrete case.

Damico urges Presbyterians to engage food industry corporations on the issue of justice for farmworkers. Small changes in corporate policies would make farmworkers partners in the industry and bring integrity “to our place in the supply chain,” she says. “When we purchase a tomato at

Publix or Stop & Shop, we don’t want to be serving up exploitation on our table.”

There is also a distinctly Presbyterian take on this issue, Damico observes. Presbyterians confess that God is sovereign over all life and that we have a responsibility for “creating a world in which humans and the earth thrive.”

This means Presbyterians are called to care for those “who are made poor by the norms of ordinary business practices,” Damico says. “Through the Campaign for Fair Food we are seeking to love our neighbors whom we do not know but whose labor makes possible our life together.”

Germino notes that while the issue of farm labor is still news to many, public awareness “has come a long way” in the last 15 years. Student-led and faith-based activism has made a difference, and Presbyterians in particular “have done wonderful work,” Germino says. “It’s been incredible.”

### ‘Do the right thing’

In a series of events scheduled from Boston to Tampa this spring, Presbyterians and others called on



**UNITED FOR JUSTICE:** A group from First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, Fla., visited workers in Immokalee, Fla., to pledge support.



**HISTORIC CHANGE:** The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange reached an agreement last year.

Publix, Ahold and Trader Joe's to "do the right thing." At a rally in Boston that drew more than 900 people, Wayne Parrish, executive presbyter of Boston Presbytery, and other inter-faith leaders signed a letter to the Ahold corporation, based in Quincy, Mass. Quoting Deuteronomy 24:14, the letter reminded the company, which owns several supermarket chains, "You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether of your own people or a stranger."

In Maryland, Mark Greiner, pastor of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church, joined representatives of the CIW in an attempt to talk with executives at the headquarters of Giant Food stores. When company executives rebuffed their request for a meeting, Greiner told CIW allies gathered in front of the building, "Giant is not listening. But God is listening!"

In Atlanta church members and others gathered for a peaceful protest outside a Publix supermarket. Mark Douglas, an ethics professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, underscored the importance of the church's participation in the Campaign for Fair Food: "Few things connect us to the rest of the world

more concretely than food," he said. "Maybe that's one of the reasons that the Christian faith is so attentive to our eating habits and table manners. It's certainly the reason that we should care about those whose labors make our own eating possible."

More than 1,500 people rallied at Publix stores in Tampa. Jean Cooley, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Lakeland, Fla., where Publix has its headquarters, explains her church's involvement: "We believe that at the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ is the call to act

for justice for those who have been left out. When we shop at Publix grocery we remember those who pick our beautiful tomatoes but do not make enough money to feed their own children or are being forced to work as modern slaves. It is God's call to us to stand up and demand that this huge corporation do justice and love kindness."

*Chris Herlinger is a writer with the humanitarian agency Church World Service and a New York-based freelance journalist.*

## LEARN MORE—Get involved

You can support the Campaign for Fair Food by praying for the campaign, by sending a postcard to the CEO of the corporation that owns the grocery store in your neighborhood or by dropping off a letter to the store manager and meeting with him or her next time you shop. For more information and to get postcards or a manager letter, contact Noelle Damico or visit the "Take action" page of the PC(USA)'s Fair Food website listed below.

- » [www.pcusa.org/fairfood](http://www.pcusa.org/fairfood)—resources and background on Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) involvement in the Campaign for Fair Food
- » [www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org)—information about the Coalition for Immokalee Workers
- » Noelle Damico, PC(USA) associate for fair food—[noelle.damico@pcusa.org](mailto:noelle.damico@pcusa.org); (631) 371-9877