

# Migrant Ministry to Farmworkers in New York State\*

In the past five years, the nature of the farmworker migration to, and within, New York State has changed significantly – and in a way that presents a huge challenge to the Church. This challenge requires a drastic change in our approach to this ministry. The change has occurred because the migrant flow into New York State (73,423 in 1993) is today largely made up of people of Hispanic background from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and other Central and South American countries. These Hispanic people are, in many areas, replacing a labor force which used to be largely a black population from Jamaica and Haiti, and African Americans from the southern United States. . . .



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State



Because of the migrant nature of their lifestyle, they now find their lives disrupted as they are separated from their homes, their families, their church and their culture. Low wages, immigration problems and a difference of language makes them subject to instances of social injustices inflicted at personal, community and governmental levels. Today, in particular, the climate in the United States is also increasing the injustices brought about by public policies that are blatantly anti-immigrant. Our pastoral efforts in the parishes and dioceses will become increasingly important as migrants have less access to other traditional service providers and agencies. . . .

Many parishes, in which the migrants temporarily reside, do not know of, or even refuse to acknowledge, the presence of these migrant farmworkers in their midst. Some parishes do reach out in many ways. Other parishes do not know how to mobilize to approach the situation, and still others are overwhelmed by the language barrier and the extra needs that are presented to them. . . .

We recognize the value of this labor pool to the agricultural industry of New York State. In many cases, this industry could not survive economically without this seasonal, low-cost, supply of help for harvesting. However, we are concerned that in such an atmosphere people can be treated as mere instruments of production and thereby be stripped of their human rights.

**THE ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED**

The following material presents a picture of the scope of the issues that are en-

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countered at the level of dealing directly with the migrants. Some of these are issues which any given parish cannot be expected to address. Many of these issues are information driven and are in a state of constant change. Some of these issues can be addressed but many parishes need help with direction and organization to meet the needs.

**PASTORAL ISSUES**

1. That the Church reach out to migrants, seasonal farmworkers and rural, poor, Hispanics and provide for their *spiritual* needs through the liturgical, sacramental and catechetical ministry of the Church, and at the same time provide for *material* needs in a way that improves their conditions while challenging us all to better live and practice our Christian faith.
2. That the Church provide a welcoming and nourishing environment where the migrants can not only be "ministered with," but can develop from within themselves a "ministering" mentality. This is an environment where they can receive instruction and be prepared to minister to one another in liturgical ministries, sacramental preparation, and pastoral ministry.  
There are some things that act as barriers to accomplishing this. One is apathy, and even prejudice, that is sometimes found in our parishes and even in some communities of Hispanics who have settled out of the migrant stream. In some cases few think of the Hispanics as equal members of the parish.  
The second barrier is a lack of consciousness by diocesan and parish social ministry structures about the needs of the migrants. There also needs to

be a stronger understanding of the need for more inclusive ministering rather than the idea of "service to" which can keep the migrant population separated.

3. That the Church be sensitive to the migrant lifestyle and culture, respect their need for cultural and traditional religious celebrations and foster spiritual growth in that way.
4. That the Church show a real "preferential option for the poor" towards migrants and other rural poor in allocating resources in these times of dwindling resource availability. There is also a need for an understanding and acceptance of this preference for the poor by the local church, the parishes in which they reside, and by the local communities.  
The widespread geographical locations of migrant camps, the people's lack of transportation and particularly the language barrier make it difficult to provide pastoral services. One of the real tactical problems of the migrant ministry is trying to visit migrant camps that are dispersed over a fairly wide geographic area, as well as trying to schedule liturgical services and visits with migrants during the long work hours that they keep during the season.
5. That the Church make resources available including Spanish-speaking personnel, materials, finances, etc. to help minister to this population. The language barrier is particularly acute when it comes to arranging for Spanish-speaking priests, catechists and other personnel to be available in the areas where migrants reside. Not all who have Spanish speaking abilities are willing to





help in this regard. So there is a particular need for diocese to develop a list of Spanish-speaking ministers who are willing to help with the liturgical and catechetical needs of the Hispanic community. This will also show the need for developing Spanish-speaking catechist, deacons, priests, and sisters during their training, as well as help in determining personnel assignments to positions that would be crucial for the Hispanic community.

6. That the Church recognize that the mobile lifestyle of the migrants presents problems of loss of spiritual values through diminished contact with their church and community, the spiritual security of which they have left behind in search of adequate employment. Providing sacramental preparation must be organized for quick delivery and there is the need of establishing interdiocesan procedures for the acceptance of preparation documentation both in the United States and the foreign countries of origin. For instance, the preparation for marriage for a couple may be carried out during their stay in New York State but their preference is to wait until they return to their home location for the marriage ceremony.
7. That the Church provide education of Church leadership about these conditions.

### **SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES**

1. One of the most immediate needs is to provide assistance with immigration matters to workers. Since these are legal matters, it requires the gathering of a great deal of information as well as experience with immigration matters. In most cases, this is beyond the ability of the local parish to provide.

2. The need for sanitary, safe and affordable housing is great. A few growers are taking advantage of federal and state funds to build clean, safe and attractive farm housing. They do this as an added incentive to attract workers back year after year in an attempt to stabilize their workforce.

The housing in many camps, however, is somewhat, or totally inadequate especially when families are migrating together. Some camps refuse housing to families, preferring instead to house numbers of single workers together in the same space. In some areas, camp housing is being closed and the workers must rent other housing, either on their own or through labor contractors. Here they face much discrimination on the part of landlords who do not





want to rent to minorities. Security deposits, providing references, and the lack of short-term rentals hinders the workers ability to secure housing.

3. Because of travel problems, distances and lack of medical insurance, many migrants face a lack of medical attention. Perhaps the most devastating situation, however, results from work-related injuries because there is no compensation for loss of time. In addition, the far-flung health clinics that provide healthcare services will be seriously affected by federal and state funding cuts.
4. Access to services is difficult at times due to the language barrier. Also, a lack of familiarization causes many to not even apply for services, and many are summarily excluded from help due to their immigration status which is often classified as "temporary." This is an area where advocates can make a real difference in improving the delivery of services to the migrants.
5. Distances between migrant camps and lack of vehicles by the migrants often creates problems in outreach to them and in their being able to utilize services to meet their needs due to their inability to get to those services.
6. Language problems create barriers in a wide variety of areas, which tends to increase the social isolation of the migrants. For instance, the migrants can be bewildered and unfairly treated during incarceration because of language problems. There is also a need for making ESL (English as a Second Language) classes more available.
7. Low level of educational preparation creates problems relating to various life areas. Problems with illiteracy present real pastoral challenges.
8. Racism, discrimination, and prejudice have tended to increase proportionately as the Hispanic population in-

creases. Local communities and even local Catholic parishes lack the awareness of the migrant presence in their midst. There is a need for education about cultural diversity as well as for work with the business community to insure smooth relations.

9. There are many reported instances of police harassment on the road, such as stopping individuals and groups without probable cause, etc., stopping cars due to out-of-state license plates, and illegally asking Hispanics for their immigration papers. There is legislation pending to further the use of police agencies and others as arms of the immigration service.
10. Help is needed in the effective application of disability benefits. The workers are often summarily excluded from benefits and participation in programs like Food Stamps, Medical Assistance, etc.
11. Laws governing rights of workers need to be bolstered. Immigration concerns need constant attention. The workers have no rights to collectively bargain in New York. Many suffer accidents on the job and receive no compensation. When this happens, in many cases, they can no longer remain in the camp housing.

### **WHY DO WE THINK THERE SHOULD BE A STATEWIDE FOCUS?**

**M**any of the migrants are mobile, travelling, working, and residing in more than one region of New York State. As a result, local groups find that they are serving the same people. In addition, many problems experienced on the local level are shared with other units throughout the State (such as pastoral problems) and the problems of the migrants themselves are the same, despite the regions that they may be in. . . .

Many issues need to be dealt with on an institutional, legislative or structural level, statewide rather than solely at a local level. These issues are:

- Health care benefits
- Immigration problems
- Disability benefits
- Collective bargaining
- A day of rest each week
- Unemployment insurance
- Housing concerns
- Minimum wages
- The right to organize
- Overtime compensation
- Workers compensation

Finally, a statewide focus makes it easier to find ways to collaborate with others and combine the efforts of those working in this ministry for greater effectiveness. 