

# MIGRANTS ARE PEOPLE TOO

*Where churches have learned to reach some of America's three million wandering poor as people, not as problems, remarkable changes have occurred. But the way is not easy. Second in a series.*

BY RUTH MALONE

**T**HE plight of the migrant worker affords one of the bleakest chapters in American history (see *THE EPISCOPALIAN*, July issue).

Now with the nationwide publicity attendant upon President Johnson's war on poverty, the country as a whole will undoubtedly be more conscious of this vast group of citizens in its midst.

## The Church and the "Stoop-Laborer"

For many years, the nation's churches have been concerned about the migrant situation, often with mixed results. As a recent study by a Committee on the Church for the North Carolina Fund has said, "The ministry that is offered [to migrants] . . . if it exists at all, is likely to be quite limited and principally paternal in character, an attitude which can well keep low-income people at a distance." This report, an attempt to deal with the Church's ministry among low-income groups in agricultural areas, states further: "The . . . Christian Church in our community, as elsewhere, appears to be middle-class in its attitude. There is no direct interest in lower-income people as *persons*, and little desire to involve them in congregations.

"The devoted members of the main-line churches live by an incredibly narrow image of morality. The Christian life consists of the cultivation of private purities and acts of kindness to the poor. Christian love is read as 'charity' and not as 'justice.' Such pietism enables the layman to avoid the social troubles around him by self-assurances of virtue. Public policy and external law are set in a compartment of his existence quite other than that dealing with faith and love. The end result is a religion of escape, hidden from sight by 'church work.'"

The profound and occasionally dismaying insights of

this report are common stuff to clergy and lay persons involved in the migrant ministry. All speak of the difficulty of establishing rapport with the laborer, and of building a bridge between a parish's attitude toward poverty and the real needs of the "stoop-laborer."

These needs are urgent and specific: community services made available to transients; health clinics; the elimination of the ancient wrongs of child labor; schooling which is not only available, but compulsory, for children of transient farm workers; proper inspection of camps; establishment of sanitary facilities; adjustment of inequities in wages and in charges for food, rent, and transportation; a careful inspection code regulating vehicles by which these people journey in three main streams up the United States, from Florida to Maine, from Texas to Michigan, and from West Texas to Washington.

## The Corcoran Story

How does a community, and the churches within it, reach migrant workers? Here is the story of a small California town in the Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin and its efforts.

Sister Anne Harrison of the Church Army, a transplanted Pennsylvanian who has worked for several years in the California migrant ministry at the behest of the Rt. Rev. Sumner F. D. Walters, Bishop of San Joaquin, sets the scene.

"Corcoran is a small farming community situated geographically almost in the exact center of the State of California, and located a few miles west of the great highway artery dividing the state from the Oregon border to Los Angeles.

"The surrounding land is used mainly to produce an

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## Migrants are People Too

especially fine grade of cotton. The community has about five thousand people living within the city limits and an equal number who live in hundreds of sub-standard dwellings and shacks on the fringe.

"Their standard of living is at the bottom of the scale. Families with ten children are not uncommon. Education has not been important and, when moving from place to place, almost impossible to get. The need for training for more highly skilled jobs is not well understood. And these jobs are rarely open to persons of minority races. Second-class citizenship seems often to have been accepted with fateful indifference.

### Concern for the Fringe

"Epiphany Episcopal Mission, Corcoran, has a special concern for these families who live on the fringe of the community and on the fringe of American life—people whose economy depends almost entirely on farm labor employment for only a few months each year. This is the story of the awakening of a church to that ministry—sometimes of frustrated efforts—but always of a developing mission to people around them.

"In Corcoran a group of ten laymen and clergymen who represent the Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches meet regularly to discuss the situation of the farm laborer and the relationship of their churches to this community problem," reports Sister Anne Harrison. "At one time this Community Mission Committee, as it is called, developed a study center for high school students. They were aware that several hundred of these young people didn't have an adequate place to study, and wished to encourage them to make use of the education that was being offered. The students refused to have any part of this project, and finally, after a long, disappointing effort, the plan was dropped."

### Giving the Help Requested

Several months ago two Mexican-American women came to Epiphany Mission to ask for help. Sister Anne was able to arrange for the women to meet with the head of an organization whose prime interest is planned parenthood. The women were provided with information and equipment at no cost. They returned with 150 other women who were eager for this freedom-giving assistance. Within a short period, more than four hundred women from the outskirts of Corcoran arrived, all of them asking for help in becoming more responsible parents and citizens.

These two stories illustrate the two basic approaches of the church in Corcoran and its involvement with farm labor. In the first story, a group of people made choices about what *they* wished to have happen in the lives of some other people. Whenever this has happened, it has been met with polite indifference. In the second instance, the persons to whom help has been offered identified their *own* problems, and the church has directed and assisted them in their self-help efforts.

Wherever this has happened, the church has been able to witness to the dignity of personal and corporate accomplishment.

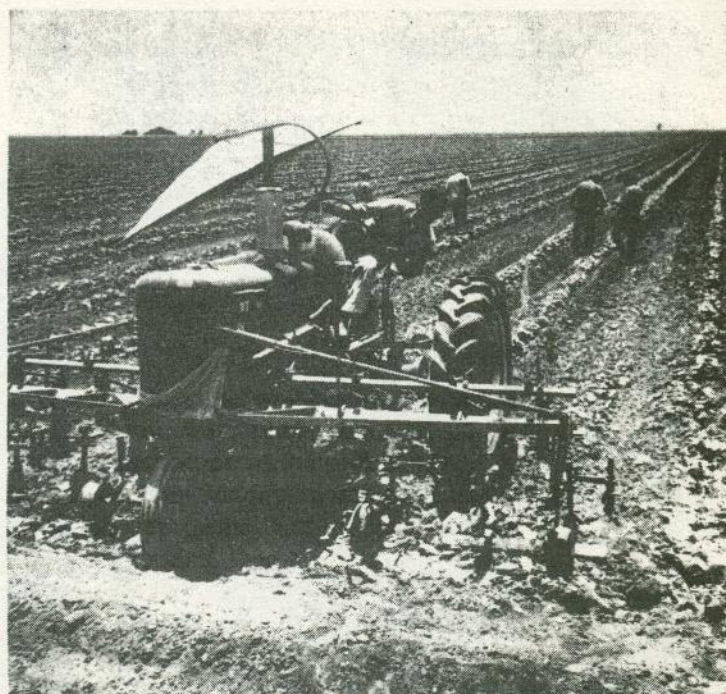
### The Migrants Come to Church

Five years ago the worshipping congregation at Epiphany Mission was small, and represented the white middle-class section of the community. Today the church is crowded on Sunday morning, and half of the congregation represents half of the community: that is, the farm laborers. One Negro woman came to Epiphany originally because she needed help in getting a local labor contractor to pay the Social Security he was deducting from her wages. She stayed because she found help, acceptance, and encouragement.

When the children of field workers are baptized at Epiphany, members of the congregation often serve as godparents. In this capacity they are asked to minister responsibly to their charges and families. They may call upon the vicar or the community worker if professional guide is needed.

One such family has nine children. The mother, in her late twenties, has never learned to speak English. She is now learning. The Bishop's warden, with his wife and Sister Anne, are godparents to the children, and have found this a valuable experience for themselves—not only in terms of what they are able to accomplish, but also for the understanding they themselves have achieved of a people from a different cultural background.

Epiphany was established as a mission in 1957 by Bishop Walters, who gave permission to a small group of enthusiastic laymen to buy land and build a church



*Machinery looms large in the farm labor picture today. In contrast to this modern tractor cultivating vast acres, the old-fashioned "stoop labor" looks, and is, inadequate.*

and parish hall even before a clergyman was available. In 1959 the Rev. Ronald L. Swanson, a recent graduate of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, was sent immediately after his ordination to be the mission's first vicar.

Initial efforts to reach the farm workers were difficult, Mr. Swanson recalls, and for a while seemed to have little effect. These efforts included assistance in the summer program of the California Migrant Ministry, and a Girls' Friendly Society which included a handful of Mexican-American and Negro girls. Study groups discussed local problems, and some groundwork was laid for future activity.

In 1961 Mr. Swanson submitted a report, through Bishop Walters, requesting assistance from the Home Department of the Episcopal National Council. The department made available the money to employ a community worker, in this case Sister Anne Harrison of the Church Army—a lay organization within the Episcopal Church (*see January, 1964, issue*).

### To Young and Old

The many daily problems Sister Anne deals with include immigration, welfare, employment and Social Security, health and education. Group work makes demands upon her time also; she has a hand in boys' clubs, Society for Girls, Episcopal Young Churchmen, and homemaking classes. The church buildings are in use every day the year-round.

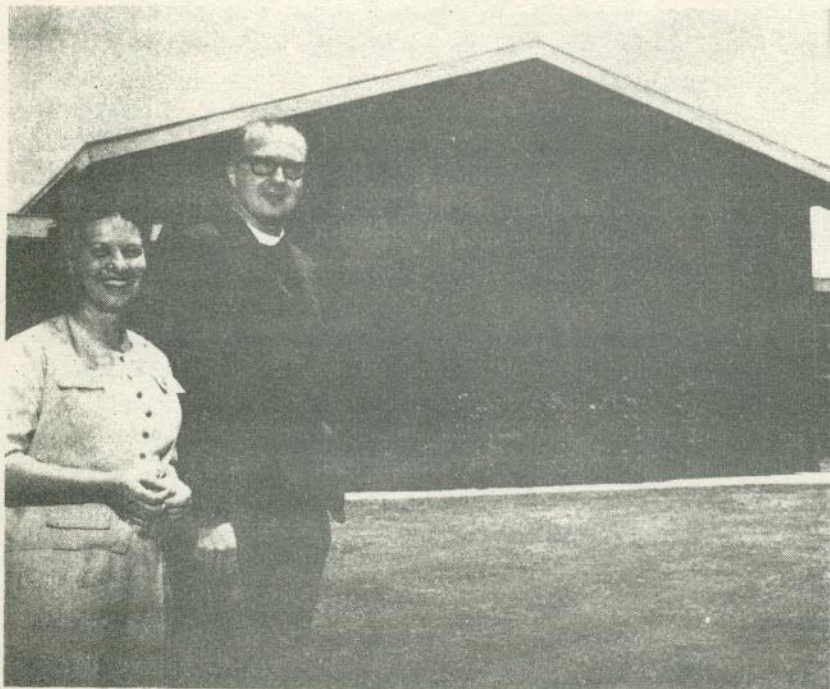
The Community Mission Committee was formed by Mr. Swanson and the Rev. John K. Tritenbach, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Corcoran. Both these men realized two things: first, that work among the

farm laborers was too great a task for any one church to undertake, and must become an ecumenical concern which would absorb many challenged Christians; and second, that any such program must be rooted among the laity and must be developed as a lay ministry, for essentially the same reason.

To sum up the efforts of this Committee is to report four facts. First, the group evolved a philosophy of the church's mission as one of social service (*what we do for them*) evolving into community development (*involvement with the farm laborer as he deals with his own unique problems*). Second, the group secured the assistance of the California Migrant Ministry, which helped provide personnel for the program. Third, the group made a study of the welfare situation in Corcoran, where large numbers of citizens are dependent upon welfare for their existence. Fourth, they involved various other community agencies in the work.

The community itself has awakened slowly to what has been developing. "Epiphany has found corporate dignity among the growing relationships of all the children of God in the community," comments the vicar. "There is much yet to be done, and much to be understood, but the greatest miracle is that it has begun—and is growing."

The migrant problem is vast, complex, often discouraging, and always a trap for the unwary. Nevertheless, one point emerges with clarity: the Church has a clear and present call to make its witness understood both by the worker and by the middle-class Christian whose understanding and assistance are vital to any successful solutions. ◀



*Sister Anne Harrison and the Rev. Ronald L. Swanson serve Corcoran's Epiphany Mission, located in the San Joaquin valley. Mr. Swanson is an assistant to Bishop Sumner Walters of San Joaquin.*



*With friendly assistance, Sister Anne outfits a daughter of a migrant family who will be given wearable donated clothing to take home.*