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Interviewer: Ryan Nilsen, NFWM Summer Intern

Interviewee: Sam Trickey

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Location: Sam Trickey's house in Gainesville, Florida

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Transcribers: Ginger Nilsen, ed. Nathan Meier

Name Abbreviations:

R= Ryan Nilsen

S= Sam Trickey

NFWM = National Farm Worker Ministry

FLOC = Farm Labor Organizing Committee

UFW = United Farm Workers

FCMM = Florida Christian Migrant Ministry

Interview Summary: In this interview, Ryan Nilsen asks Sam Trickey, a Physics professor at the University of Florida in Gainesville and a long-time board member of NFWM, about how he first got involved with NFWM, how his beliefs and values have affected his involvement, how he has been impacted by his involvement, and what he would say to people who might be thinking about becoming involved. In his responses, Trickey discusses growing up in Texas, his first marriage to a Mexican-American woman (Lydia Hernandez) whose family was involved with farm workers, meeting and working with Baldemar Velasquez of FLOC, UFW presence and campaigns in Florida, his identity as a Presbyterian and his relationship of his work with farm workers to both his local church congregation and the national Presbyterian Church. He also comments on union activity in Florida, several consequences of his efforts to be a public voice for farm workers, and tells the story of a significant spiritual experience he had while delivering a speech at a Presbytery meeting.

R: Alright. So this is Ryan Nilsen sitting with Sam Trickey on August 17th. It's about noon, and we're at Sam Trickey's house in Gainesville, Florida. So we'll just get started. So, Sam can you tell me how you first got involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry.

S: So Ryan, I wrote you a long email with a lot of details,ⁱ and if I were to read it back it would take too long to record, so let me see if we can do that more briefly; my first wife was Mexican American, who was born in S. Texas born to parents who came across the border to escape the Mexican Revolution. Her name was Lydia, in Spanish, Lidia Hernandez. Her father, Jose Hernandez, converted to Protestantism sometime after he came to the United States, and went to a special training program at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Austin to become a pastor. He was a pastor of Spanish language overwhelmingly or essentially 100% Mexican or Mexican American Presbyterian churches in South and Central Texas, New Bronpulls, Victoria, South Therias, Weslico, basically anywhere from Austin south over his life.

Those congregations had significant subsets, significant groups that followed the old classical migrant stream from Texas which typically went from the south to the Midwest. Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan. Cherries in Wisconsin, I don't remember what in Michigan, field crops vegetables, tomatoes, and that sort of thing in northern Illinois out west of Chicago near Rochelle. Those activities were organized through the old national council of churches, migrant ministries, and related state and local migrant ministries. This is from my memory. I don't have good records, and my ex wife and I are not on good terms so I don't have access to her as a resource either.

I believe, if my memory is right, that the summer of 1965 that my father-in-law Grandpa Joe we called him, Rev. Hernandez, was working for a state or local migrant ministry in Wisconsin. Remember at that time the whole civil rights fervor was sweeping the country, and minority groups in general. Cesar Chavez in the UFW had become an incredible, visceral, powerful force w/in the Mexican American community very analogous with, but not as well noticed as Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had become with African Americans. Some workers that Rev. Hernandez was working with had heard about the UFW, and decided to do an action. My memory is that it was a parade. I don't think it was a strike. I might have said in my notes that it was a strike but now that I think about it, it was a parade calling attention to their desire for better working conditions, better wages, and so forth. Rev. Hernandez joined that effort thinking that because it was clearly for the benefit of the workers that the local migrant ministry board would support him. To his surprise, but not to those of us who now have been around for awhile, the local board was controlled by influential local business people, including growers, and they fired him. This simply hardened his resolve, or in old vocabulary from the 60's, it radicalized him, so the UFW board and farm workers organizing, more generally, became a topic in our family. I was pretty deeply incorporated into that family. It's a big family, a typical Mexican family. You always get together at Christmas. There was no question, we went to her family although we sometimes went to my family but you had to end up in Austin with her family. That's the beginning.

Now, I was in graduate school at the time so my focus was on getting a grad degree in theoretical physics, not in social justice work. I also don't come out of the union background. I come out of a very, very cautious, sort of old fashion Republican conservative background. My father, who was a faculty

member out of what is now the University of North Texas and my mother who was a public school teacher were both part of an era where academic freedom was not a big deal. They were extremely cautious, but they're nothing like modern Republications, much more like what you would think of as a Robert Taft kind of Republican 1948 in Ohio, although my parents were from Michigan, Indiana, Illinois. So my natural instinct was not to pay much attention other than to listen and to learn, but slowly be moved by the correspondence between what was going on with these workers. I had married into this family and learned to speak Spanish, and began really to understand the pervasive effects of racism and social prejudice and so forth. Again, I am being a typical physicist and digressing from myself here, but remember that in Texas at that time racial segregation involved both Mexicans and Blacks. When Lidia, my ex-wife, and I got married it was in fact illegal to do so because the miscegenation laws were still on the books. We had to go through a bit of subterfuge to get a marriage license. That is a whole other story.

So I had learned because of my emotional and personal commitment to this family...I had really learned face up a lot of the realities of being poor and being racially prejudiced against that had been abstract for me learning in the church and high school growing up. So in 1966 the Presbyterian Student Association. Again I don't have any records of this, but I think it was in Spring because I think the melon strike was in Spring. It may be as late as 1967 though. Anyway there was a watermelon strike in South Texas by UFW, it was extremely futile. You can plow watermelons under in an afternoon and it was brutally broken up by the Texas Rangers. I showed you this picture of AY Alley, the captain of the Rangers. It was famous and brutal and notorious strike. A bunch of people in the Presbyterian Student Association basically said to me, Sam, you're married into a Mexican family, and I [sic] know something about this farmworker organizing business, find out what's going on in South Texas and do a program for us. I have no notes from this, and I don't really remember what I talked about. I just remember that I did it. Again, my focus was on getting my degree. But that meant that I did need to actually learn the issue, and I still have documents, issues of El Mal Criado that were published in the valley from that time.

We moved here, in Florida, in Sept. 1968 because that was the only job I could get. That was after spending a few weeks with Ohio migrant ministry and Dark County migrant ministry in Greenville OH, near Dayton. I think it's Greenville. That is another tangle. Lidia's brother David had become Director of this regional or county migrant ministry in Ohio. When I got my PhD there were no jobs. After sending out 147 resumes I got one interview and offer. So we stored all of our furniture in Austin with her parents who had retired, and just took our car and some clothes and a camera and went to Ohio and worked for David. Lydia is a RN, so she was working the clinics, and I drove a school bus for migrant children, so I was up at 4:30 in the am driving the bus, probably illegally because I didn't have a commercial permit but nobody noticed. I translated in Legal Aide clinics two nights each week, and spent most of my daytimes going around looking at farms and labor camps for violations that were potentially reasons for action by the Ohio State Labor Department. I didn't put in the notes, by the way, that that's how I met Baldemar Velasquez. I was 27 at the time, and I think he was 24 or 25. He was a year or two younger than me. And I've said several times in public, much to Baldemar's amusement, that my take on it at the time was that this guy didn't have a chance. That this guy's farm labor

organizing committee was Baldemar, three of his closest friends and a couple of his family members, and that was about it. The point is that the whole farmworker movement, once UFW got going, and remember the UFW itself has a very complicated set of ordinances as it includes Philipino workers, Mexican workers and others, once that got going it caught, it was almost like a disease, except it was a very beneficial one, on fast.

In 1996 in Quincey, West Florida, the mushroom strikers went on strike, and Virginia Nesmith says I tell this story a little overblown. I remember it is pretty close to right. They basically went on strike and called up UFW, and La Paz said, by the way you have a strike in Quincey, Florida. I said, where is that? Rebecca Harrington got there. I was the first member of farmworker ministry to get over there, and I digress. That's many years ago.

The point is that this movement caught on because people are motivated to do it. And so there was Baldemar in his 20s struggling away, and I thought he had a hopeless chance.

So anyway, we moved to Florida and I got involved very heavily with a brand new local congregation, Westminster Presbyterian, of which I am still a member. They had a strong social justice advocacy and compassionate ministry component of a new church [sic]. I am fond of saying that the Presbytery set Westminster out to be an experimental church without defining the experiment. It was a rocky time, there was a lot of controversy; I'll put it this way, I'm a very articulate debater and my tongue was too sharp for some of my Christian sisters and brothers. I regret that. The church staggered along some, but it remains today very much classical, almost conservative in theology but very strong in its social outreach. So, Lidia...

R: Can you comment further on the dispute at Westminster Presbyterian?

The dispute was about a conventional church vs. non-conventional, and the symbolic issue was whether or not to build buildings, and if you build a building, what kind of building. This placed the social justice in the following sense: if you build a conventional sanctuary with pews you've a.) got a big mortgage and b.) you cannot use it except for liturgical purposes. What we ended up doing is building a community building that has no fixed seating and an open floor and can be used as a kitchen, as a meeting room, and was comparatively modest in terms of its impact on our income. It was still a stretch but anyway...

Lidia got in touch, and I again do not remember how. I would guess through her brother David or maybe through her father or with with a man, Augie, August, Vandenbosch, Director of Florida Christian Migrant Ministries. He immediately got us involved in working with FCMM, which was an autonomous state migrant ministry, but Augie knew Chris Hartmire. He knew what was going on in California. Remember that this was all connected through the old National Council of Churches Migrant Ministry. I believe, but you would have to check with someone that knows more authoritatively than I because Augie died a few years ago, I believe that Augie was a field worker for the National Council of Churches, at least initially I'm quite sure that is how he was brought here. Bob Sandman would know or Chris Hartmyer would know for sure. So, at that point it's 1968, early 1969; now you are in the middle of the Great Boycott of all the UFW stuff, so we became the people that brought UFW issues and campaigns

to Gainesville. Gainesville was a very small town at that point, probably 45,000 to 50,000 at the most, university enrollment, let us guess approximately 16,000, with the enrollment approximately 48,000 now. It was a very rural place, with a university that was not happy about its faculty being engaged in social justice publically. I sent you an article about that. I should have looked this up. I believe that UFW started its citrus organizing in 1969, but it may be 1968 or 1970. I'm vague on that point but we can find out. I have boxes and boxes of paper in this closet. That meant that they put a bunch of pressure on Coca Cola, who owned Minute Maid, because it was a clearly boycottable set of products. Minute Maid was very well known on the East coast, and particularly, Coca Cola was of course known internationally. That led to a contract early in the 1970's. By 1971 they had field offices in Aislen Park, in Fort Pierce, and again I don't remember. Lidia and I were very involved in that, as was the rest of Florida Christian Migrant Ministry, which were [sic] a lot of people. There came out of that the roots of the modern day Presbyterian Church hunger program through the church somewhere in the Tampa Bay area, I can't remember the name of the church now. Again, I didn't prepare well for this but we can find it. That's how it happened. Now, the why did it happen is another story.

R: I'm interested in this particular church that you've talked about. To what degree was Westminster Presbyterian involved in support of the boycott and your efforts in general?

S: Westminster has not been your classic progressive church. It was very cautious about passing resolutions, and that sort of thing. It was supportive in 1974 or 1973 when Chavez first visited and stayed at our house and delivered a speech at the University of Gainesville organized by a student organization that brought in famous people to give speeches and it had the character of a rally in the Plaza of the Americas, a big green space in front of the Library. There was a discussion meeting with him in person of supporters, approximately 25 to 30 people, and that was held in the home of Glen Dickson who was the pastor of the church. Glen organized this and offered an open house for this. The leadership of the church was very supportive in terms of helping support resolutions in the Presbytery and the Senate. We were a Southern Presbyterian Church, PCUS, and we converted ourselves into a union congregation so that we were in both Senates and both Presbyteries, the old PC(USA) without the parentheses, Northern church, and the Southern church. That meant that we had a chance to both introduce overtures to both Presbyteries but we also had to defend a tax on pastors and congregations that were socially active from people who were very socially conservative. Keep in mind that the Southern church in particular at that time was deeply troubled by the tensions over desegregation and the associated social implications. There were several congregations that departed the denomination. There were ancillary disputes and very intense ones over ordination of women. I recall having to go to Orlando to a Senate of Florida meeting where a church in South Florida was being disciplined for its refusal to ordinate a woman as an elder.

The congregation was very supportive of that, and they supported individually the boycotts of that time, the Grape Boycott, later the Lettuce Boycott. They were supportive of involvements by me and by Lidia; she went several times to California to participate in various actions. By this time NFWM was formed in 1971 out of the old Migrant Ministry, and I haven't narrated anything about the struggles that it took to get Florida Christian Migrant Ministry to change its mind and become part of NFWM. There were a lot of reasons for that, I think mostly good. Early NFWM and FCMM cooperated, and later FCMM dissolved

itself. There was a lot of pressure on FCMM at that time, budget pressure and influential people pulling their money out, so I suspect if you had the books of the old FCMM you would find out that the budget peaked in about 1970 and started downward after. Controversy does not necessarily engender contributions.

So you were asking about support... I went during the Teamsters Strike in 1975 for a week to help the translator in Coachella and I recall the General Assembly paid some of my expenses but the congregation took up an ad hoc collection to pay for some of it.

R: They have generally been supportive but not...

S: They have generally been supportive but not, I would say, demonstrative. Two years ago we had Farmworker Awareness Week and we had an Interim Pastor at that time. It surprised me Sunday morning one time when I walked in for worship and the pastor said to me that he was preaching on a passage and a third of the way into the sermon he planned to ask me to come up and respond to that passage in terms of the Farmworker Ministry. So I have about 20 minutes' warning. And I hope I'm not arrogant, but I am a reasonably gifted public speaker. And I feel comfortable speaking in front of a group on a topic with which I have familiarity. No one in the congregation was shocked about that [my involvement in the sermon]. It was a little unusual but not totally off the wall. The church gives approx. \$1000/yr to the NFW in its budget, and has for 20 years. It is supportive, but it is not the sort of church that after coffee we are all headed to Publix to do the demonstration so it's a little tamer than me.

R: Has that changed...is it distinct now from when you first started?

S: No, I'd say that generally we have tried in Westminster to say to people that we are a body of Christian people and that we take seriously the reform tradition that the laity must give assent to one and only one question, mainly the acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. So doctrinal conformity is not a legitimate question, implicit doctrinal conformity, that is to say, agreeing with and putting your signature on a petition or going to a demonstration is not an appropriate question. It is very clear that people who are strongly socially conservative, who view Christianity as essentially a combination of liturgical and personal morality are not going to be comfortable in that congregation most of the time although to be truthful there are some people who fit that description who are there. And my reading on that is that their view of people like me is somewhat like my view of people like them, namely I don't understand their vocation but it is not my privilege to stand in judgment, these are my Christian sisters and brothers with the same baptism, the same communion, the same gospels, the same covenants. That does not mean I understand what they are up to. That is a separate question.

Mostly in Westminster we have these discussions, pretty intensely but with a kind of intense gentleness. Nobody is running anybody else out on the buses as a heresy trial. It was much more taught in the early days of the congregation in that regard, because in some sense there was, one can hardly talk about tradition in a church that is only 40 years old, but there were no practices, there was no unstated but clear social compact amongst us, but there is now. If you come to Westminster now and you have talked to people in Gainesville, you would know that it is an odd combination of informal but moralist conventional worship, a lot of Sunday School and Bible School and that sort of thing, and a lot of social

outreach. It is not your usual, by the way it causes a problem, we are way off of NFWM, it causes a problem because we don't fit well in any of the evangelical categories, so we don't grow a lot.

R: Sometimes it's good then. It is good not fitting sometimes. Some of that conversation transitions nicely. I'm interested in why for you it is ok for everyone in the community not to have the same social conventions or practices, that they are not all involved in the Farmworker movement, but for you particularly, how have your beliefs and values lead you to your involvement with the NFW Ministry?

S: I can't resist a witticism. For the people who do not yet understand the social justices issues of Christianity, my view is that of a teacher, there is always time to learn. Why am I still there, since 1966? And that's the date I want to use because that's the first time I ever opened my mouth regarding farmworker advocacy. That is 45 years out of 70. I would rather not...It would be more convenient not to be Christian. I can't 'not'. I really am influenced by Calvin's thinking. I've read some Calvin, I've read some other theology, I've had a little formal theology training. I was reared in the old Northern Presbyterian church in albeit in N. Texas. Yankees had moved south and set up congregations, but this particular congregation was actually a Cumberland church that had become a PC(USA) somewhere in the 19-teens. The church school literature of that era. I was born in 1940. When I was 8 up to when I was 16 was literature that was very much a combination of mainstream classical reformation theology and a kind of liberal social progress set of ideas, very characteristic of mainstream Protestantism from 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. I still have some of the books, and I go back and look at them. As a friend of mine Ken once said, "Y'know what is wrong with us?" We were on our way to Lakeland to try to have an interview with the President of Publix, I think about lettuce. "We took Sunday school too seriously." He was right, in a certain kind of way.

I have a very difficult time discerning my calling looking forward. I did not intend to be a theoretical physicist. I got interested in theoretical physics when I was in graduate school. I went to grad school to get a masters degree and ended up with a PhD because a Department Chair got me a scholarship without my knowing about it. It was announced to me one day that I was a PhD student.

I have a very difficult time discerning my calling looking forward. I have a tendency to do what sounds right in terms of what I have learned and been taught in the church, and trust by now having lived a fairly long life that looking back it will make some sense. Some things don't. My grandson's death 2 weeks ago makes no sense at all. None!

Coming to Florida, looking back makes a lot of sense. That is for 2 reasons. Professionally I ended up in one of the best groups in the world, in an area where it turns out that I actually have some pretty serious talents. I had to change specialties to fit into that group, but given the job market there was no choice. At the time it seemed like an absurd burden, but looking back, it was a blessing. Coming to Florida made sense in terms of church witness and in terms of the farm worker witness, a Spanish speaking gringo who can speak in public and argue with the growers on the basis of facts. I'll get back to that in a minute because that is an issue of style. It is a very deliberately chosen one which became an asset to Farmworkers and to social justice more generally. Now again, I don't want to sound pompous. I'm certainly not Chris Hartmire, I'm not Cesar Chavez; I'm sort of second rank in importance, and that's

ok, because I decided that my calling was to be a physicist and an academic, and a Christian who could say with authenticity that I don't work for an organization that is committed to farm workers. This is a decision I made on the basis of my prayers and my thoughts, and I don't get any money out of it. It is not my career, not to demean people for whom it was. I have a huge admiration for Chris Hartmyer, an amazing guy, and an enormous sense of loss with Fred Eister who was one of my best friends and who died way prematurely. Fred was a Social Director. I missed a chance to see Richard Cook. Virginia Service, holy mackerel, struggled with the anxieties of budget and the vicissitudes of different priorities of different unions.

But my calling was different. In looking back, it makes sense. I made a remark about style. By style here I don't mean superficial, but a choice about the way I did things and still do. I come at these controversies as a man who knows numbers, a scientist who knows facts when he sees them. I also have the right accent. My native accent is Northern Texas but I've learned to speak generic Southern. So the people cannot knock me for being an outsider. I am not. My high school was in Texas, my University degrees are from Texas. I've lived most of my adult life in the South. I eat barbeque as happily as anybody else and know what black eyed peas are on New Year's Day, the whole bit. You cannot knock me as an outsider, and I play that game. I will deliberately go to rallies or speeches. I do wear cowboy boots at times just because I want to feel ethnic. But when I go and give talks, I will deliberately do it as a symbol. It basically takes away this outside agitator business. Then I go after people on the facts. Where are your data about the \$150/day tomato pickers? Show me your numbers. Prove to me that your numbers don't show the contributions of a family of seven under the same SS# instead of an individual. Prove to me that you are enforcing these pesticide regulations that you talked about so much. Prove to me that you have trained these people. Prove to me that they can read the labels. These are all rhetorical devices, but they all are aimed at issues that are pertinent to farm workers. What I have learned, and learned very early on, was that that rhetorical style or that approach was of value to the farm workers and one that I am comfortable with. I am not comfortable with some of the other styles, but that is not the point. There are other people gifted at that.

I can and have made significant progress in debates on Presbytery floors and in open forums. Oh, my mother would cringe...forae...my mother was an English and Latin teacher. The other point is to go after the theology. What do you mean when you talk about the spirituality of the church? I grew up in Southern environments, I have heard all these arguments about the church as a liturgical collection of moral people. Read to me the last part of Matthew 25, please. Go through the New Testament and read how many places Jesus addresses the poor. Read to me the places where the remarks are "Woe to you", and the "woe" is because people are practicing their faith hypocritically. They are exploiting people. That combination, a physicist who insists on arguing about the numbers and the data and ties it to theological arguments, is one these people are not accustomed to running into. That has been my niche. It has its limits, but that has been my niche.

R: When you say "these people" are they the unsupportive, unsympathetic people within the church?

S: No, representatives of growers at meetings, you know the typical issue. You have a meeting at something, not as common nowadays, and we have to have both sides. Or, as someone once called it, a

squirting match with a skunk, in the press, so you have to write letters to the editor, you have to be interviewed by the local TV station. I was much more visible in the 1970s than I am now. I was very careful never to be interviewed on campus, never to let a reporter say that or imply that my role as a faculty member at the university gave some authority as to what I was saying. With the Farmworkers, my authority came from my direct knowledge. Again, what the Farmworker Ministry with the support of the Presbyterian church did was it frequently allowed me and Lidia to go around and see things. The authenticity issue again is that I speak Spanish. I would run into these grower representatives who would say that “we know the workers in Delano, back in 1971, are dissatisfied with the UFW”. I would say “Really? Do you speak Spanish?” “Well no.” “Well who translated for you?” “Well, y’know” “Well was there 6 weeks ago and I...” And I was making it up, but, you know, that kind of thing. But that’s my calling.

R: I hadn’t asked that one explicitly yet but...

It is my calling. I cannot stand up in church on Sunday morning and say the Apostles’ Creed from the Book of Confessions, and I cannot lead worship. I cannot do anything like that and then turn around and ignore Matthew 25. It just cannot be done. There is a wholeness here Don’t misunderstand me. Sam Trickey has all manner of flaws and sins, some of which I will talk about and some of which I will only confess in private. That is not my point. The point is that I have to as a matter of calling put up that struggle toward and for consistency. It would be a blatant hypocrisy to do otherwise.

R: When you started talking about starting your calling, you say you can look back and understand more where you’ve come and how some of that made sense. Are there a couple of anecdotes that you could share where things have clicked?

S: All manner of stories...Sometime in the early 1970s, the Florida Farm Bureau Federation had an editor named Al Allsibrook who started in on UFW organizing in Florida. He said some things to some local radio stations, including one that was an am country music station that I occasionally listened to, that reminded me of home. The comments were about the situation in California, and I heard a quote from him that I was pretty sure was not true. I went down to the studio, a little studio on Kincaid Road on the East side of Gainesville, and they played it back for me. It was clearly untrue, so I submitted to the radio station that it was untrue. Somehow it got into the newspaper, The Gainesville Sun, but I don’t remember how. Anyhow, Allsibrook also wrote to the paper. I wrote back and said “No, Mr. Allsibrook doesn’t have it right. I was there.” The idea was to discredit UFW in Florida by what was going on in California. That was the basic issue. Let the record be clear. I am not fond of Al Allsibrook. He was later in the administration of the University, and I thought that it was a mistake. I dislike the man. Generally when I have been around him I have been formally polite, but I would say that to his face. He quit doing things in the open press, and he published an article in the Florida Farm Bureau Magazine. The article was titled: “Dear Dr. Trickey”. It was on the cover page of the magazine. Mind you, I was not tenured at that point. 1972, because I remember I was tenured in 1973. So this means that with two young children and untenured, and not terribly popular in the Physics Department because of my social justice involvement, our Department Chair at the time did not like the idea. My next door neighbor on the 11th row was a guy who actually worked at the Farm Bureau part time, and he came over one evening and

said “I need to tell you something in utmost secrecy.” This is thirty-some years later and I don’t think I’ve ever told this part of it. He said, “The Farm Bureau is about to print a really nasty article about you. Be prepared.” I talked to Tom Scott, Department Chair, and then Herman Spivey who was Acting Dean, and I remember Dean Spivey, with a very nice Tidewater, Virginia accent, said, “Well Sam, I cannot temper your understandable anxiety, but as long as I am Dean and you have behaved according to Academic Freedom standards, as meticulously as you have, no harm will come to you.” Tom Scott was not a man who particularly liked me, but he showed integrity. He told me to call the Dean. And the dean told me that I’d be okay.

For the 75th anniversary commemorating the founding of the Florida Migrant Ministry, we had a Presbytery or Senate meeting down at Eckard College, and due to Presbyterian ancestry way back I have a grasp on Presbyterian Parliamentary procedure, so I put my name on the register and had been recognized by the chair to speak and waived my speech but reserved the right to speak later. It was a very intense debate about a Farm Worker issue, what later became the Hunger Program. Glen Dickson, my pastor, was sitting next to me and Bill Litch, one of the old stalwarts of the old Migrant Ministry, spoke, wonderful man. The people on the grower side spoke about the classic one hundred dollars a day worker. It’s now the one hundred fifty dollars a day worker. And then I claimed my time to speak. At the rostrum, I had some bullet points to use, and I don’t want to sound arrogant again, but I’m trying to be honest. Usually when I speak I’m pretty good at it but this was different, this was eerie. I get emotional when I think about it. It is one of my few direct experiences with the Holy Spirit and I do not use those words lightly. Ryan, every single word was right. Not just good, right. The room went silent. Now as I say, I am a good public speaker, but I’m not that good! I went back to my chair and had some sense that something was going on. Glen Dickson said to me “Do you know what you just did? You just turned the debate completely around.” It was recorded and I’ve listened to it only a couple of times but it was spooky.

R: For a physicist, to have a respect for the mystical?

It was a mysterious, eerie, spooky experience. It was not me, in some sense, something very special was going on.

R: So what were the consequences of your talk?

S: Oh the resolution failed or passed but Glen was right and the situation turned around.

There have been other less remarkable or dramatic things though. To stand with the farmworkers in California last year for the Board Meeting and the workers were in the park and we could talk with them some, but many times they have said to us we did not know we had friends in the city. That always stuns me, because they are so grateful to us, where it seems to me it should be the other way around. They make me think about my priorities, my money, how I use my time. They were friends.

I’ll tell you one more story. In 1975 or 1976, Lydia, Mathew, Phillip and I were living in California in San Jose when I was on sabbatical working for IBM. We go to La Paz right after the farm workers moved there. We had a Boycott Lettuce sticker on our bumper of our microbus. We reared our children as

Spanish speakers so Matthew only spoke Spanish at that time. He was three and a half years old. We were walking from Cezar's office around to where the other offices were with him when Mathew grabs Cezar's hand and says, "Senor Chavez, Senor Chavez," "Si Mateo," says Chavez, "sabes que dice..." and he's pointing at the bumper sticker and Chavez says, "que dice?" knowing what it said of course, but Matthew responds, "No compre chuga [sic]," but he's a child so he can't say lechuga, "Ohh, muy bien Mateo!" says Chavez. And here was a man with enormous stresses and problems and he takes a minute to a minute and a half to talk to a three year old who's explaining his own bumper sticker to him.

R: That's a great story. It seemed like you were articulating well your perspective on being Southern and not from the outside, speaking to and working within this Southern culture; I wonder if you could comment more, having been to California and some of these other sites, on what is particular to the Farmworker movement in the South generally and Florida particularly. And specifically the work of the National Farmworker ministry.

S: The unions in the Farmworker Advocacy organization, UFW, FLOC, which attempted to do some work here but is pretty much withdrawn in my judgment, not visibly present but may be supporting their workers, their focus is North Carolina and the Midwest, Farmworker Association of Florida, CIW which is not technically a union but certainly has been an effective farmworker advocacy organization. For all of them, the first real problem is symbolized by the existence of the Right to Work Laws. Which is to say, if you have a state with a Right to Work Law, you typically have a very hostile environment for any kind of worker organizer. There is a long Southern tradition, Bert Perry can talk to you about her father and how he was unwilling to deal with the unions even though it would have benefited him. There is a long Southern tradition of individualism and a kind of personal tenacity in workers that have made them proud and hence unwilling to unionize, perhaps not as true in the Blacks, African Americans, and not particularly true in Mexican Americans or Mexicans. There is not a climate, a tradition of widespread unionization like there was in California. Secondly, there was not the tradition of liberal, progressive, socially-oriented churches in the South as there were in California. Although, it must be said that there were more churches than people give credit for. But they also were very consumed by, in some ways I think worn out by the struggles of desegregation.

Again it was in my lifetime, seventh or eighth grade, Brown vs. the School Board of Education in 1954 and Little Rock Central High School in 1956. I remember going through TexArkana when the National Guard was in Arkansas with a banner over the Texas-Arkansas border "Welcome to the Occupied Territory of Arkansas". Churches took an enormous amount of stress dealing with that, and my sense looking back, I don't think I thought this at the time, is that the churches in the early 1970s in Florida were already stressed, tired, and beleaguered by the whole business of dealing with desegregation. Add to that farm worker organizing, and it was for many of them more than they could cope with. I am somewhat sympathetic with that; it was not what should have happened, but the pastoral part of me says that it is not so surprising. Things were pretty stressful. If you again come out of the Southern quietus, pietas tradition, where the church primarily is a source of comfort, having a locus or forum for controversy is itself a pretty mind-bending and hard thing to deal with. I don't agree with that, but then again these were Christian sisters and brothers who grew up with that kind of tradition and it is no surprise that they found this hard to deal with. Those are the things which occur to me.

The other thing that occurs to me is that in S. Texas and California, there was a long tradition of the presence of Mexicans. After all, big chunks of those are conquered territory, Guadalupe and Hidalgo, which anti-immigration people kindly and conveniently forget. Florida did not have that tradition. Bertie is fond of saying, and she's a little younger than I am, we have gone from a migrant stream to a moderately indigenous predominantly African American to a mixed area of African American and Mexican American to almost entirely Mexican American and some Central Americans, Immokalee, immigrants, the overwhelming majority of them do not have documents. That's a double shift. If you are dealing with a culture that had been segregated, to introduce new, allegedly inferior, and therefore exploitable, the syllogism being that they're inferior, it's not surprising again that you get a lot of tensions and it is hard to do. I'm not saying that it wasn't tough, and I've been in California for a lot of actions and campaigns, but the difficulties here are different. Finally, there was no progressive tradition. There was some Liberal Democratic tradition in the FL legislature in the 1970s into the early 1980s; Governor Askew, for example, was a remarkable man but after that it was just farther and farther to the right. By now there is no viable progressive or socially concerned legislative tradition in the state at all. None. The state government, at best, is not a resource at this time. There is the civil war xenophobia too, the outside agitator business. It is one of the less charming aspects of the South that outsiders are suspect. Those are the ingredients that occur to me.

R: Thank you for that answer. That was good and comprehensive.

S: Oh, Cynthia when she first knew me, she said to me, "Sam, you don't answer questions, you tell stories," and my response without even thinking was, "Let me tell you a story."

R: I'm thinking about getting involved with the farmworker ministry too and so it's nice to hear your perspective. So if we could draw to a close here, what would you say today to someone, today, who is thinking about getting involved in the National Farmworker Ministry?

S: Needs are large, but not intimidating. Now, what is the point of that remark? I run into people who say that these social justice concerns are so immense, how can I do anything meaningful? The answer to that is manifold but, essentially, don't underestimate yourself, and don't overestimate the intimidation factor of the issue. Courage was too strong a word. I was scared, but I was stubborn, so the issue is tenacity. I started with me, my wife, and my Smith Corona typewriter. I would love to see more large financial contributors to the budget; bring it on, we need it. We also need someone who will give \$25/yr and sign the petitions, and once or twice a year will go to the grocery store manager and tell them my name is Bill or Susie and I buy groceries here and I'd like to tell you about the farm workers and their cause. Because that's water torture in a way...these companies don't give up out of principle, they give up because they're weary of being beleaguered by people who will not quit. And the ability to avoid quitting is a lot higher if the burden is shared. Consumer action is very important. One of the facts that we learn early on from the work of Dolores and Chavez and Larry Utey, is that giving my identity to the workers is crucial. Down in central Florida in a board meeting in January, a year ago, we went to a bunch of Publix stores. Those managers can't do anything but Publix will grow tired of letters to store managers, letters to the editor, blogs, local TV stations.

It may sound selfish, but an activity like this is a diversion from consumption. You are giving of yourself, not shopping for some gratification from some object. You are not hoping for gratification, but the assurance I can give you is that some kind of surprise, a farm worker will say something or you will see a result that will surprise you. It will be a gift in the sense that it will be an unanticipated, unmerited gratification. So the irony is that you give and somewhere, sometime... It may be just being remembered by a worker as the Gringo who speaks Spanish who was here four years ago. That kind of thing.

For those who are Christian, I would say explicitly, Jesus is often quoted as telling the poor "I will always be with you". There is a reason. It is always in somebody's short-term, self interest to exploit someone. We as Christians are obliged to push back on that. The Kingdom of Heaven is not the kingdom of exploitation. So since it is always tempting to someone to exploit somebody else, and our specialty is farm workers, and there is rampant exploitation, the thing to do is push back. Join me in pushing back.

R: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we close this?

S: Haven't I talked enough? It has been a saga I did not expect. It took me places that I sometimes did not like. I have been scared, but it has also taken me places that lead to wonderful stories and wonderful memories, and a real sense of growing authenticity. I would not say I have reached authenticity, but growing towards authenticity would be better, in the Christian faith.


One more story, just an anecdote. I was in the University Administration during the Quincey Melon Strike. The local radical newspaper, The Iguana, gave me the cover article, which put me in conflict with the University President. He was never honest enough to admit it. He had a lot of ego issues. I lost my job that Spring as CIO at the University. I don't think the article helped.

We got the news about the strike on a Tuesday, and I talk to Rebecca Harrington, whom I had known through Texas and was an old friend of my ex wife, then Bert, and she couldn't go, and finally talked to Cynthia, who I have now been married to for 28 years now last Saturday. Rebecca asked us to meet her in Tallahassee, the state capital, where she said that she and a delegation of workers will be meeting with some AFL-CIO people. So we get on the road in Feb or March, we stopped at Quincy, and we were the first MFWM representatives to show up, and we brought the Manager there a letter from the President of the MFWM to show support of the workers.

And then we went out to Quincy and these were all Mexican workers and they had done the typical Mexican thing, they had built booths on the side of the road, with fires going, cooking, but we got an injunction from the Deputy Sheriffs because the growers controlled the state district court. Well we also had a guy there from the Steelworkers from Mobile, another Southerner who spoke Spanish. So we're talking with Rebecca and we're talking with the workers and we had a problem because the deputies wanted to get the booths torn down and none of the workers spoke English at a useful level. One Deputy spoke to the two of them on the side, and he said, "look you guys can do anything you want as long as you don't make me and the other deputies look bad. I've got an injunction here, I have to at least give the appearance that I'm enforcing it. Can we work something out where we get the booths back off the road, we keep people off the road and don't distract traffic and I'll keep the other deputies in control. And remember, none of us speaks Spanish so you guys have to get this arranged." We went

back, talked with the workers and explained to them that this is the reality of civil rights demonstrations in the South. You cannot embarrass the police, it won't work. But if you'll draw back, give them a margin, they'll be very respectful and keep their part of the deal. What I was worried about was that someone would be really belligerent and start shooting or something. Not a realistic possibility but always kind of in the back of your mind. What the workers didn't understand was that we really needed the deputies out there to make sure that some guy with a real case of belligerence wouldn't come by in the night and shoot 'em up. So we basically brokered a deal and I think I hope that that senior police officer heard from me as a representative of a faith-based, Christian organization. I told him I was there for that reason. I hope what he heard as a witness that we disagree but we respect you, we don't belittle you and we know the strictures and constraints under which you're working. I took the letter [containing the brokered deal?] up to the guardhouse and the security guard, looked like a rent-a-cop and could tell that her job would be on the line by taking this letter in, she looked at it as if I handed her a letter containing anthrax or something, but she eventually took the letter in and eventually they got a contract and the company closed the place. Not the sort of thing you learn as a physicist.

i
from **Sam Trickey** trickey@qtp.ufl.edu

sender-Sent at 4:42 PM (GMT-04:00). Current time there: 3:59 PM. 
time

[hide](#)
[details](#) 8/15/11

to NFWM North Carolina <nc.intern@nfw.org>

date Mon, Aug 15, 2011 at 4:42 PM

subject Re: NFWM Documentary Project - questions

mailed-by qtp.ufl.edu

Important mainly because of the words in the message.

Dear Ryan,

In this email, let me give you some responses to your questions.

In the next email, some directions for finding my house.

NFWM North Carolina wrote:

> Sam,

>

> I don't believe that I'd sent you an email yet, so I wanted to go ahead
> and do that in order to give you a heads up on the direction I am going
> to be headed with the interview. I'd like to talk to you about what
> brought you to the NFWM, hear some stories about your involvement and
> how it has impacted you, and give you the opportunity to share a word
> with people who might be interested in being involved with the NFWM.
> We'll try to make this a more or less organic conversation and other
> questions will likely come up that I will ask from what you say, but it

> might be helpful to see some of the questions I'm thinking about at this
> point.

>

> 3 main questions and potential follow-ups under each:

>

> 1. How did you get involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry?

Very long, involved answer, because my involvement predates NFWM in its modern (1971 and onward) form and with that name.

My first wife, Lydia Hernandez, is Mexican-American. Her father, Jose A. Hernandez, was a Presbyterian pastor for Spanish language congregations in south and central Texas. During Summers, he would work for the predecessor organization of NFWM, the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches, and/or local or state Migrant Ministries. In a sense, he was following the congregations he served as the participated in the migrant streams which were a pattern of the time (mid to late 1950s).

I met my ex-wife when she was a university student in my home town (Denton Texas). We married in late 1962 and kept a Spanish-language household.

By 1965, when I was in graduate school (Texas A&M), my father-in-law had heard of the efforts of Cesar Chavez and the early UFW campaigns. (Recall that the US was awash in civil rights struggles at that time.) Some workers in Wautoma Wisconsin (I think - this is by memory; I have no records from that time and my ex-spouse is very hostile to me; it may have been elsewhere in Wisconsin) started a local organizing effort for better wages and working conditions, in the spirit of "we are with Chavez". Rev. Hernandez naively assumed that his employers, a local (or state?) migrant ministry, would back him in joining them. Instead, because the growers were the financial supporters of that migrant ministry, he was fired. This simply hardened and clarified his resolve. So farm worker organizing and the UFW came into our family very early.

In 1966 there was a watermelon strike in South Texas. I was still a graduate student, and not active in organizing. But somebody in Presbyterian Student Association asked me to talk to the group about the South Texas situation, so I did my homework and gave a presentation. Candidly, I do not remember what I said. I vaguely remember that Pedro Grimaldo, a cousin of Lydia's who was reared as a brother, went to the Rio Grande Valley to help with the strike.

Meanwhile, one of Lydia's brothers, David, had gone to work in Ohio, near Greenville, for another regional migrant ministry, in Dark County. In summer 1968 I graduated with a Ph.D. into a dismal job market for physicists. No job. So Lydia and I stored our belongings with her family and went to Ohio to work for David. I drove a school bus for the migrant kids school, translated in legal aid clinic, and looked for grower violations that could lead to actions by the Ohio Labor Dept. Lydia worked as a nurse.

In Sept. 1968 I was offered a temporary post here at the Univ. of Florida

and took it. (Eventually that became a permanent post, a separate story.) In 1969, I believe but am not sure, Lydia was put in contact with Augie VandenBosche, the Director of Florida Christian Migrant Ministry. I don't remember how this happened but it is safe to assume that either her Father or her Brother made the contact. Thus, we began working with farm worker organizing in Florida. Lydia was more involved than I, as I was struggling to move from a temporary to a tenure-accruing position, then struggling to get tenure. Some thoughts on my professional history are in the pdf attached. The opening paragraphs and the last paragraph may be of particular interest. UFW came into the state not too long afterward, 1970 or 1971. As a bi-racial couple (it was unlawful in Texas for Mexicans and Anglo-saxons to marry when Lydia and I got married; another story), we had a lot of shared interests with Mack and Dianna Lyons, early UFW organizers (He was African-american, she is Anglo-Saxon. He died about 3 - 4 years ago.) So it became a personal thing as well.

> a. How did you first hear about the Ministry?

Two ways. Partly through the close relationship of Florida Christian Migrant Ministry and its Director, Augie VandenBosche, with Chris Hartmire and partly through my ex-wife's brother, David Hernandez. David was the first Associate Director of NFWM. I attended the first annual meeting of NFWM; there was an organizing meeting in Summer 1971 in Atlanta (I have the dates at home) and then an annual meeting in late Nov. or early Dec. at the Episcopal Conference Center near Avon Park Florida.

> b. Why did you choose to get involved?

The shorter version of a much longer answer is that I could not ignore what the Gospel said, nor say the creeds of the church in worship, and not be involved. I had grown up in strict racial separation and fallen in love across racial lines. (Only long after my parents' death did I learn that they had taken some fairly explicit criticism for my involvement with a woman of another race.) The more I saw what economic exploitation based on racial and socio-cultural divisions did to people, the more I became convinced that the authentic church is kenotic (out-pouring). Also, it is relevant that I grew up in the "northern" Presbyterian church (the old PCUSA), in which there was a lot of biblically rooted social justice emphasis in the Sunday School material. So when I joined the old "southern" church (the PCUS) because it had the Mexican congregations, it was at the time that the South, including Texas, was struggling with desegregation. (I did one lunch counter sit-in in Houston; was scared. Fortunately not arrested. I do not enjoy such demonstrations, even though they are necessary.)

> c. How have your beliefs or values affected your involvement with the Ministry?

I think it is probably the other way around. I am well-to-do. But I have learned to keep a comparatively simple life, to give away a large fraction of my income, and to support the dis-enfranchised and poor because I have been around farm workers and heard and seen their pain and exploitation. And I saw the impact simply of low wages and racism on my ex-wife's family and on her. See question 2.b. below also.

Another aspect is that I have pushed the organized church, in a variety of ways, to be serious about its social justice and compassionate ministry outreach.

> 2. Will you tell me the story of a specific situation in your work with
> the National Farm Worker Ministry that has had a significant impact on you?

See the last paragraph of the professional article attached. There is also a story in the 75th anniversary book, I think.

> a. How have you changed from your overall involvement with the Ministry?

More multi-dimensional, less of a narrow, nerdy intellectual that I might otherwise very likely have become.

> b. What has kept you involved with the Ministry?

Our Lord is quoted as saying that the poor will always be with us. That clearly is not an excuse for resignation (as it is often-times used) but instead an analytical remark. The poor always are with us because it is always to somebody's short-term, cynical advantage to exploit those who are weak and make them poor (or keep them that way). NFWM is a specialist organization that pushes back on that cynical self-interest for two reasons - one the inherent worth of those being exploited and two the inherent cleansing of the exploiter when s/he quits exploiting.

And then there is Matthew 25, the sheep and the goats

> 3. What would you like to say to people who might be interested in

> getting involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry today?

The needs are large, but not intimidating. Individual and small group help - by consumer action - makes a difference. Come with me and listen to farm workers say how surprised and gratified they are to learn that they have allies and supporters in the cities in towns. The problems of farm workers in industrial agriculture are recognizably the same all over the country. The solutions vary, but always involve worker self-determination and empowerment. Reconciliation comes after redress of gross imbalances. Help do that.

> a. Why should other people get involved?

>

To make a more wholesome, more livable, more moral society. To respond to Matthew 25.

> Looking forward to meeting you soon,

Good. Peace, Sam

> Ryan

> *

> *

> *_-*

> *NFWM North Carolina*

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