

Title of recording: NFWM Interview with Bert Perry on August 18, 2011

Title of Series: National Farm Worker Ministry 2011 Documentary Project

Interviewer: Ryan Nilsen, NFWM Summer Intern

Interviewee: Bert Perry, NFWM-FL

Date and time: 10:30am on August 18, 2011

Location: National Farm Worker Ministry office in Deland, Florida

Length of Interview: Interview in two parts: (1) 74 minutes and 47 seconds and (2) 7 minutes and 28 seconds

Length of Transcription: 14 pages

Transcriber: Cori Nilsen, ed. Ryan Nilsen

Abbreviations:

R = Ryan Nilsen

B = Bert Perry

NFWM = National Farm Worker Ministry

UFW = United Farm Workers

FLOC = Farm Labor Organizing Committee

UCC = United Church of Christ

RCA =

AMA =

Interview Summary: In this interview, Ryan Nilsen asks Bert Perry, longtime NFWM staff person in Florida, about how she first got involved with NFWM, how her beliefs and values have affected her involvement, how she has been impacted by her involvement, and what she would say to people who might be thinking about becoming involved. In her responses, she discusses meeting Cesar Chavez, having grown up in the United Church of Christ, African-American farmworker struggles in the 1970s, her husband losing his job because of her work with unions, and unions in Florida, generally. She also tells the story of FLOC and NFWM coming to North Carolina.

R: This is Ryan Nilsen sitting with Bert Perry in the National Farm Workers Ministry Office in Deland, Florida. It's about 10:30am on August 18th and let's get started. So how did you first get started in the National Farm Worker Ministry Bert?

B: I first got involved, you want the real story or do you want the public version?

R: Whichever you'd like to tell but...

B: Well I first got involved because my husband and I came back to Florida after he got out of the service after Vietnam and we had a little kid so I went to my, we went to our home church in Melborne United Church of Christ and they didn't have a Sunday school so I thought well do I go to another church? But I like our home church and all our friends and family are there so we started Sunday School. So I started Sunday school with my 18 month old non talking non reading child and realized that I didn't like children so I was misplaced. And a friend of mine who was now retired in Oregon said I know what you should do (he was on the staff). He said I know what you should do, so he took me a then United Farm Workers Organization Committee meeting that was, they had a union here in Florida, and I met Cesar Chavez there and we talked for about 45 min or an hour and I've been here ever since. So my friend did a good reading in knowing and it got me away from children.

R: Was that the public version or the real version?

B: That is the real version.

R: Okay

[Laughing]

B: The meeting Cesar Chavez part is the public children, I don't tell everyone I dislike children.

R: Ok, nice so you first heard about it from your friend, and why did you, what were your motivations to get involved other than not liking children.

B: Oh um, well when I went to the organizing meeting in Florida and Cesar spoke and afterwards since he knew our conference minister friend, he arranged for me to just sit and chat with him and I was sort of looking for something that being, my growing up and being a part of the united church of Christ and we are a very social justice type of oriented people and so I was sort of looking for something to do within my local church and within the broader church and the global church. Um, that where I could use the skills and interests that I'd learned in the UCC and this seemed to me living in Florida and having lived in Florida for many, many years and knowing nothing about agriculture except that you see postcards with the truck full of oranges on it that seemed to appear from nowhere or they just come from the supermarket. It really fascinated me hearing him talk about the lives of farmworkers and that time, most of the workers that I met (30 years ago or however many years ago now) were African American and white, they were black and white. There were very few Hispanic, Spanish speaking workers in Florida at the time that the UFW started working so there has been a big shift in the population of workers but each time a new group of workers is brought in for the purpose of keeping

wages low, I mean that's the only reason why. I mean it just fascinates me that from the original talk with Cesar about how he could see that all coming and it would be worth my time, my churches time to care about people that we never saw.

R: Can you talk about that shift more, in the population?

B: The shift in the population, well according to a friend of mine, a labor economist whom I met not too long after that meeting with Cesar, umm every 20 years or so (it's shortened up it's time a bit) but every 20 years or so people began to realize they should have better working conditions and people begin to group together or organize. The agribusiness tends to replace those people with people who are less trouble. And in FL we were sort of late in the civil rights movement; we didn't quite get it for a several years after the rest of the country. Umm so in the mid-70s when the African American workers began to say we don't have to be treated like this and also in the civil rights movement many of them left the fields and went into the urban areas where things were happening, the reaction from the agri business was rather than to raise the wages or improve the working conditions, to just find someone to work cheaper. So it was then that people mostly from Mexico and parts of Central America and in some cases we had a lot of Haitian and Jamaican workers here because they would come and work cheaper and as immigrants they didn't have the rights, supposedly, that Americans had. And so that happened and when the UFW started organizing here in Florida, it was about the same time that other immigrants were brought in to replace the African Americans and because Cesar was very good at integrating the work force here in Florida, much more so than in California because we already had people shifting populations and so the population here was made up of Africans Americans, Haitians, Jamaicans, some Caucasians and people beginning to come from Mexico and Central America and when that started happening a lot of the argibusiness, especially in South Florida, stopped hiring Mexicans and started bringing in Guatemalans and people from Costa Rica and Belize and people just kept replacing populations as soon as a group realized that they need to be less exploited.

R: So where are we now in Florida with people, workers coming in in cycles and it taking them awhile for them to realize that they can ask for, demand more?

B: Well I think now that mostly the agriculture worker population is Hispanic or Latino from some various countries but a lot here in this county, we do ferns, you know we grow the plants that go in pots, and many of those people are Mexican, there is also a lot of Guatemalans and the new thing is there are a lot, well not a lot but there are people from the Philippians and there are some Laotians and the population is changing slightly and predominantly here is still Hispanic. Those are the people that are immigrating here, documented or not, those are the people that we are getting and they are desperate for work and so they work in agriculture.

R: Cool, well not cool but um, can we re-visit, you said you grew up in the UCC, in a pretty social justice oriented context, can you talk more about how your beliefs and values have impacted your work with the National Farm Worker Ministry.

B: Um, yea I think so. I guess the values I got or the interest in people who were stressed, you know not necessarily exploited literally but who were stressed was what happened to my own family when I was

young. And at one point we were living in CT and we were displaced from a home, we were homeless basically and it was the local church that picked us up and that would happen to be a congregational church is a part of the United Church of Christ and that made a big impression on me. So we stayed in the United Church after that, my father's family was Mormon and my mother's family was Catholic but after that we stayed with the Congregational Church and seeing that kind of activity happen over and over and over again. It made sense to me to put my energies somewhere that would pass that if someone does something good for you, you do something good for someone else. And then once I met the United Farm Workers and got interested in that issue, especially because I really like to eat and it seems like if you like to eat then you should have concerns about agriculture both farmers and workers. So the UCC at all of our meetings and also the United Church of Christ was our main sponsor or founder whatever of the Farmworker Ministry. And at that time the director of the National Farmworker Ministry was a United Church of Christ pastor so I met him through the UCC also with my ministry friend who introduced me to the ministry as well as the workers so it kind of all just fit together. So I volunteered for a year in 1978 and here I am.

R: Can you tell a story or stories about your involvement and maybe how your involvement has changed over that period of volunteering.

B: Um, I guess the major one, you know in the papers that you sent, some sort of events that question basically, was at the time when I met the farmworkers and the National Farm Worker Ministry and my husband worked for Winn Dixie, which is a grocery store, was then the major grocery store in Florida, and he was a store manager and when we moved to Deland so he could manage a store here, I became really active within the UCC churches here and also in the greater community, the broader community because there are a lot of farmworkers here and at the same time the farm labor organizing committee had a state person here, whose name was **Fernando Cuevez**. I met him through the farmworkers stuff, you know, actions and activities and we became good friends and I decided it would be a good idea to invite him to our local UCC church to talk about farmworkers and agriculture. So I did that and the newspaper, and in that talk we also talked about the social responsibility of corporations, the compliance is the word I think I might've used, of grocery stores wanting cheap stuff so they did not object to what was happening in the supply chain and the newspaper was there and they did an article with a picture and everything on a Sunday and the next Monday the supervisor came to my husband's grocery store and said they had a report of him stealing 60,000 dollars' worth of groceries which was in my, our garage probably so all this stuff happened and it ended up that he lost his job, he lost his career and people inside the system told us right away that it was because of the comments I made about agri business and the need for unionization among farmworkers and Winn Dixie was and still is very very anti-union (as the old south companies usually are). Um and so he basically lost his job, so that was a major event in our lives, but it did teach me something, the UCC 's statement of faith says there is a cost and a joy to discipleship and there was a big cost but at the same time we really had a lot of fun because grocery store managers work 80 hours a week and so all of a sudden he was home with me and my two little kids, so we had a lot of fun and it was after that that I joined the staff of the national farmworkers ministry because I wouldn't do it before because I figured it would get us in trouble, but it got us in trouble anyway so you know. And he was out of work for a couple of years and it was not easy,

he got blacklisted in the Florida grocery industry, so it was an adventure to say the least but it was also pretty remarkable in how the workers reacted and it was pretty cool actually. So the first thing he did after he lost his job because of my involvement with the unionization and it was more because of that then my relationship with the National Farmworkers ministry, I mean if I had just done charity work that would've been fine but since we were advocating for unions in Florida, a right to work state, and it was just around that time that Florida had become a right to work state. And the reaction to farmworkers trying to unionize in Florida, our legislature voted to make us a right to work state and all that was happening while I was doing my little personal journey and I had no idea that it was that big a deal but we found out and so it was umm, it was an adventure, I would say. And so then I went to work for the National Farm Worker Ministry and I'm staff a few years later and here I am.

R: So that was all in your first few years, you said '78 right?

B: Yea that was when I was a volunteer and then the actual article came out in 80, oh I don't know '83 I guess, '82 something like that. I don't remember what the year was, I have it stashed around here somewhere. Umm and then after that I went on staff, quote paid \$10 a week in grocery money on staff for the ministry. And I think many of us who are a part of the ministry, a part of the early days have very similar stories. Of course the first thing my husband did after this happened, there was a board meeting for the Florida Farmworker Ministry and the first thing he did was go be a part of it, he wanted to figure out what exactly happened. So it was good, we had a court case which he lost, and a whole bunch of legal things after that Winn Dixie event and it's sort of one of those blessings in disguise things. He got out of the retail, grocery business which is a difficult profession anyway. So that's how we got here and then he uhh, he's always been very supportive obviously and still is. He does a lot of stuff with us.

R: so you said when that was happening and early on that you were just figuring out the larger context of what it all meant. Over the years kind of looking back at that as you've learned more about the agriculture movement here and the work with the National Farm Worker Ministry, has your perspective of that experience changed?

B: I think it was a much more, I mean it was a serious event to me personally and to my family; you know you've been a store manager for 10 years and all of a sudden you don't have a job and at that time the store managers of these small towns had some of the best jobs in the community, so that was a big deal but I think I didn't realize how far reaching the web in agribusiness in any state probably, but in Florida in particular, how significant those political and anti-union forces are. And I also realized that it is part of the um, and it still is and I don't see it being much different, it's more subtle than it was then. And when it had happened, friends said it had nothing to do with the performance of the store or any of that stuff it's her. It's what she does. And it's that whole question of control, by companies, by corporations, and in a state like Florida which is an agricultural state. I mean we have other things now, tourism and some other industries, but it is still basically an agricultural state. And if you look at our systems, in this state, from the legislature, from the governor on down, it is very anti-worker, it is very anti-farmworker. We had one governor who was in favor of labor relations, similar to California labor relations act, and he just got buried. So it hasn't changed that much but it is more subtle and other organizations and with all the struggle it is still very, very difficult for farmworkers to organize. The best

example probably, I mean the UFW has no presence here anymore. The farm labor organizing committee has no presence here and more even though the workers come back from NC and work here in the winter but as far as an organization. They all kind of gave up because they don't have the um, not because it wasn't important. I think it is because they don't have the resources. The UFW spends it's efforts in CA, it's their home base. FLOC's NC and here we have a couple organizations, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, who much of agriculture thinks is a union but it's not, it's a community organization and they have the same kinds of attitudes towards the coalition as towards UFW and FLOC, you know the empowerment of workers is not on the political or social parameters of the radar. Especially now with our current political makeup, it's even more difficult.

R: What do you think are the historical roots of that sentiment, of describing Florida as a particularly anti-worker state?

B: Well I mean we are a southern state, we are a state that was built and survived on slavery for all those years and um one of our congressman, and I don't remember who it was, I'd have to look it up but it was back around the time when I first started and they were talking about agriculture and his comment was well we don't own slaves anymore we just rent them for a season and that's still basically true and if you look at the lack of rise in wages, the lack in rights even though supposedly people, it's a right to work state, it's just not allowed in segments of the population and agriculture is the biggest one. Florida is still pretty backward when it comes to some of the social issues.

R: How do some of these dynamics in Florida make the work of the National Farm Worker Ministry here unique, as you've mentioned NC, CA and I know that in your experience, you have traveled quite a bit and know the work in other states. What is distinct and peculiar about Florida?

B: Um, you know I hate to keep saying that we are still backward but we still are. And it's a part of the whole anti organization, any excuse to save "money," and I think it's also, uhm. When we first moved to Florida in the 50s, middle to late 50s, Florida was a union state in many areas of it. My father and mother both worked for the government, my father worked for a contractor RCA and they had a union and as new companies moved in from other places in the south, that were trying to find cheaper places to be, you know Florida was pretty inexpensive, they brought those southern, anti-union sentiments with them and I think that was always apart of agriculture and became stronger even in agriculture because many of our senators and representatives all had come from agriculture, they still do. Several of our governors come from agriculture or have come, so the whole idea that farmworkers are people too, or that they are not slaves that we rent. That just because they are people that work in the dirt, they don't have to be "dirt poor", it still hasn't caught up with other segments.

R: How does that affect the specific activities and projects that you both have worked on and are currently working on with the National Farmworker ministry here? Or what are some of the projects you are working on?

B: Well in the beginning the big thing was the support of the United Farmworkers and their right to organize and that was our main thing and organizing, carrying that message to the churches. Well now that we don't have any farmworker unions, a lot of our support goes with the coalition of amocly

workers because they are “acting like a union” even though they aren’t a union, they are organizing workers and memberships and things like that so we do that same kind of support and carry the message to the churches. And in the context of that over the years since we have changed to an immigrant population, many of those whom you know English is their second or third language, the dynamics have changed as public sentiment towards immigrants has changed. It is more difficult sometimes to convey the need to protect farmworkers because they are not us.

[27:25]

And I think that has made even going to speak to churches in maybe the last 10 years or so, people will say you know they are illegal, and you can say well no, there are “illegals” but not everyone that works in agriculture is an undocumented worker but people don’t see that all they see is people running across the border, but they don’t get mad at growers for hiring them at even cheaper and cheaper wages, they just get mad at the people coming here, which is a very different kind of situation with which to deal than you know if you were just a farmworker being badly treated. And so in a lot of ways it is harder now to support farmworkers than it was during those union organizing days and during those times. One of the first things I did when I volunteered with the ministry was to go with a bunch of church ladies mostly and stand at the edge of a field so that if farmworkers wanted to talk to each other usually about the UF Ministry, if they wanted to talk to each other at lunch or on some break time, they wouldn’t get beat up, they would be left alone because we would be standing there watching the crew leaders, watching what was happening and as long as we were standing there, us white ladies, the workers were protected. That was pretty awful but at least it was very blatant, I mean you could see it right. And now the ways to make life difficult for people, especially if they are un-documented is much more subtle and the general public doesn’t have the same kind of sympathy or empathy with low wage workers that I think we use to have, not only in agriculture but anywhere but I think it is particularly evident in agriculture where they are not us. And I find that, as a church person, very hard to accept and I think that in the last 10-15 years maybe that’s been a motivation for me to still be here as a person who believes, who welcomes immigrants and we forget our history. My grandparents weren’t “us” either, they came over from Poland and worked hard and were poor but they weren’t, you could pull yourself up by your boot straps but the people in agriculture don’t have boots so it’s hard to do that. So I think there is a real, and I don’t know if it is because people in the general public had been frightened and I think that is a lot of it, you know the political discourse that has been going around in the past 10 years but I think it’s, for communities it is very scary and it makes exploitation of workers easier because they are not as willing to say this happened or that happened or we need help for this or that and a lot of the stories we get not from workers are when we do things like deliver school kits or take health kits to people or those kinds of things where you have to sort of sometimes be covert in your activities. You have to provide a cover to have them feel secure and comfortable in talking to you, like I’m a church person here’s my charity instead of I’m a church person, we are here in solidarity with you, which I find pretty scary since it’s what 2011 ½ and we are supposed to be people who are progressing somehow and you know workers, the pay hasn’t risen in 20 years in agriculture which means what do you do with less money, I forget what the last comparison of today’s wages worth and real value; they are struggling more and have less resources and less energy, we wonder why aren’t they organizing now and a lot of it

is financial resources and I think a lot of it is just they don't have the energy and there is nobody willing to take on that leadership role. And a lot of that I think is that in Florida and other places too we are intentionally and immigrant population. I mean these growers want immigrants, they work cheaper, they are not going to say anything, which was different than when the workers were us, black or white. They had a better social network system to help them so now that we are discounting people that aren't us, it makes it more difficult.

R: So you talked about when you go into churches representing the National Farmworkers Ministry and face kind of anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-farmworker, anti-union, have you found over the years, ways that are particularly effective in talking about the work of the national farmworker ministry, to that particular audience or do you have other audiences that have been particularly helpful in helping to see a broader picture or perspective?

B: Well the best place to go when you want to get a message to a church is to go to the women, I mean that's the best place to go and even there you get those same kinds of questions, however, just talking about you know "Do you eat?" "Did you eat today?" "Where do you think that food comes from?" You know those kinds of simple sorts of things. Though the best kind of way to talk to a church is when I'm able to accompany a farmworker to go do those talks but that doesn't always happen because those things happen during the week and people work so just to speak sort of on behalf or for them or in support of workers is uhm, I think it's a little more difficult than it use to be because of the attitude towards people. Not that they have a bad attitude towards people but that I think that everyone now is so protective of themselves and so worried about themselves that people have a compassion only so much before they can't handle anymore. And when your own family is stressed and you don't have a job and the concern for others is difficult but even then in churches and other groups, a good place to talk is the (azalea?) because they understand civil rights and human rights and that's their whole thing to do but in churches I still start with the charity thing. That's nice when churches do charity, I mean that's what we do, but now we will sometimes get a church that is interested in something and we will have them do something like make school kits, health kits, or food bags or something so you really have to start back up really with Kindergarten justice. Why are we sitting here making food baskets for these people? And it's the same thing that Cesar did, the charity, he called it Service to Servant-hood when you start out with your service or your advocacy and solidarity and now we call it Service for Justice just for the language but you would think after so many years, in a state like Florida, where not only the National Farm Worker Ministry but if there had been other organizations and the farmworkers themselves talking about justice for workers then we wouldn't have to go back to the making these things and here while you are making this basket, let's talk about why you have to make a basket, people can't buy their own food. This is what is wrong with the system, after 20 years in agriculture, you still can't buy dinner for your family. If that happened in another, I mean it does happen more now than the 20 years ago where people were struggling, we are a very low wage state for the first part, so people can kind of understand that but they still believe that people that work hard should be able to sustain their families and send their kids to school. So you kind of have to keep going, you know back, to that question. And then you know with churches you can, churches like to eat so when they have their potluck and they go through the line I always ask them don't take anything out of buffet line that hasn't

been touched by a farmworker, so they get to the end of the line and they have pretty much an empty plate, because the salads the meat, pretty much everything has been touched by farmworkers. And it is a little annoying sometimes to have to go do those things but then again this is a new generation of people than the last 15 years, whether they are new to Florida, the retired folks that come from other places from cities mostly aren't aware really of how the food gets to them. I don't think that will ever change, we use to say it'll be nice when we can work ourselves out of a job but I don't see that happening and I think that is depressing and I think it is a part of the agriculture system that causes that because every time people begin to organize or community gather or whatever you want to call it if it technically isn't the union organizing. Any time they begin to organize in communities, and then they are just replaced with people who are more easily exploited. And in Florida, I don't know if you are familiar with the slavery convictions that we have had in Florida over the last decade, and those are African Americans for the most part, they are us and so we shouldn't be still prosecuting other people for slavery in the state of Florida but we are and I don't know if we need more voices to tell those stories, I mean FL is a pretty big state and there are only two of us that work here, used to be one of me for many, many years. And it is true, in most of the areas that we've worked. California is a huge state and there are only two people there. So there is an opportunity for outreach but I still believe that without the National Farm Worker Ministry we wouldn't have the support for workers in this state that we have now, even though it seems like it is getting harder resource wise to do it, that NFWM does is because of the relationship with the Bible, old and new testament and Jesus feeding 5,000 and talking about immigrants, all this stuff that's not talked about in the Justice discussion in a lot of the churches is not talked about sort of out of the earth. I mean there is a certain connection to people that sit in pews when they think about the people that work with the earth, because the bible and everything in it is agriculture related, you know that's what people did, you either did that or you were a king or something, which is sort of how it is now comparatively. So people understand human existence when we remember how it was when agriculture is what supported kingdoms. So it was important, I mean to be a farmworker was a noble thing, to be a worker in a vineyard was a noble thing, even if they weren't treated that well, I mean they were still workers they were slaves but there was still something that was appreciated about people that worked with the earth and that's not true anymore. So I think to get people to remember, to get church people to think about that, helps them realize that, not only church people but anyone who thinks about history, that there is no way in good conscious that workers who pick our food and produce our meats and all that stuff, shouldn't be able to buy it for their own families.

R: So how have you personally changed or been impacted by your involvement with the ministry over the years and how you approach other situations in your daily life or just in general?

B: Well I think personally I certainly think it has made me raise my children differently than I might have raised them if I hadn't have been involved in this issue. It has also given me a lot of conflict resolution skills that you learn to be, when it is necessary even though you may resist it, you learn to be a little diplomatic, you have to learn to listen and I think I have also developed an appreciation or an understanding or something of farmers that I didn't have when I started this work and a lot of it comes from sort of a change and perspective of the workers more than it does the ministry because we take our clues from the workers and I think it started for me, probably for people in other places it might

have been different, but for me it started when I worked with Baldemar Velasquez, FLOC, and when he began to approach the growers and when he began to look at agriculture as not a conflict, which here that's what it had been, it was growers versus workers, which wasn't really getting us anywhere fast, it was always a battle and the rhetoric was pre-confrontational on both sides.

R: What was the difference in the perspective of Baldemar...

B: Yea, well Baldemar, well I met him like 25 years ago, I think that was his beginning feelings because that's how his family was treated, it was a violent confrontational relationship but when he began organizing he started taking a different look and agriculture, he looked at it sort of as the growers being as powerless as the workers on small farms, mostly family farms, they weren't that small, but family farms because they were dictated to even before they planted their crop how much they'd plant, how much they'd get for it, what their capital investment would have to be, et cetera, et cetera. And no matter what happened during their season, this is what they were going to get for their crop, Period. So they had no power either, in the system. I think he realized before anybody pretty much, that the approach was not to be so adversarial but to get some of those growers on our side, you get better we get better. So that's when he started those three way agreements that included the processor, so he put the responsibility on the processors and on the companies like Campbell soup, so when he did that it changed the dynamic and I know when he first started one of the biggest adversarial growers in Ohio, I don't know, 10 years later, he was the key note speaker at the FLOC convention and that's pretty remarkable to me, that he did change the conversation, now that kind of conversation has not quite reached Florida, we have a different situation than the farms in Ohio and Michigan but it did also give some people some pause to think that it doesn't have to be and if you look at it from a faith perspective, which I think is how James (Didn't get last name) is viewing the whole situation, which I think it making more sense to figure out how to make everyone more better off than to fight about small spoils because the growers weren't really in as much of a detriment as the workers because could say how they lived and ran their businesses so that was a dynamic change and I think it was also a change within the thinking, it changed my thinking, and then when I started looking at things like the agriculture things, the things I was involved in day to day, it also made me look at other kinds of things, you know social justice issues and other kinds of just day to day things. Things are not "black and white", I mean you can over compromise but it doesn't always have to be an us and them conflict.

R: So what would you like to say to people that might be interested in getting involved in the National Farm Workers Ministry today?

B:Um, gee I would like to say a lot of things, what would I like to say simplest, I think simplest is that all of us and since we are a National Farm Worker Ministry, we have a lot of members who believe in the justice part of it whether or not they are church members but I would say that in the context of faith and belonging and working in support of a Ministry that the least of these if you look at our systems today, our people in agriculture and the people in the service industry, and I think that if you want to change a system of exploitation then you have to start from the bottom, from the people least of these and in agriculture of course these people are the workers. And if you look at it from other kinds of biblical perspectives, there's the immigrant, and the women, and the value of life and in an industry where

people and it's not only agriculture, there are situations more now than there was 20 years ago, in an industry where people are not valued as employees but rather more as equipment, and that has been fed, we don't talk to our trucks why should we talk to workers, said by a grower. Um, so if you look at that need to be a person of responsibility to people as humans, I don't see how you could avoid supporting agriculture workers whether, well I would hope you would do it through the NFWM um but I don't see how you could live in this country and not support the people who pick our food. I just don't see it. You can support other people also, at the same time, but I think that is a basic opportunity, and because the NFWM does have connections both historical and present connections with workers who are struggling to change the system and their work environment, and the conditions and pay and all that stuff, because the NFWM does have those connections and has been supporting those workers for so long it seems to me that if you are interested in what you eat then you should support the NFWM because it is very difficult no matter where you live, it is very difficult to go out and support farmworkers with no connections to those workers. When the NFWM changed from just a charity organization to also a justice organization the purpose of that was to be the bridge to carry the message to the churches, to the workers who didn't have the resources, money, time, energy, to speak for themselves, we are the messengers and that is still true, that we have the message to give from the farmworkers on what's going on in the local places and on a broader perspective, you know the global perspective. So I think it is an opportunity to make a large impact with a small number of people. When I joined the Ministry we had a staff of 18, now we have a staff of what 6-7, I forget how many there is now, but that is a big impact, you can influence and affect a lot of people not only through the justice work but through the public policy work that we do a lot of and stuff like that with our legislatures. And it is an easy way for one person to make a big difference. And you get to meet wonderful people. And you get to appreciate what you eat. And I would, well I couldn't guarantee it but I would pretty much think that anybody that interacts with farmworkers never looks at the way they eat again, even if you are not interested in justice, most people are but even if you are not interested in the complexity of agribusiness and all that once you interact with the person who actually harvests your food and you really talk to that person about their lives, their jobs all that stuff, you never look at your food the same way again and I think that is the kind of message that the NFWM carries to people. And that you can make a little difference, I mean it is pretty easy when you can talk about boycotting things, I mean boycotts have worked in agriculture, it takes a long time but they have worked and it's not that big a deal to eat a grape for a couple of years, but if enough people don't eat a grape, the workers get better jobs. To me a good way to affect that system is out of a strong basis in faith and justice, whichever one is more important to you.

R: At this point is there anything else that you want to share or say, a story or thought?

B: Let me think here. Should be lots of stories, they just don't want to pop in my head at the moment.

R: A story that had a particularly transformative experience on you, maybe?

B: I think in more recent years and in working here with the farmworkers, the farm pickers, I always thought that women were affected when working in the fields but I never knew that many, most of the leadership in agriculture in the labor movement have been male, except for Deloris Huerta. But she was an exception. Local leadership for the most part has been male, and I think when we started working

directly with women who worked in the nurseries here and to hear about their difficulties when working in stoop labor while pregnant or before pregnancy or after pregnancy and also the effects that the chemicals and pesticides have on their babies and themselves, is really always distressing to me and I guess that is another reason why I am excited about the women's group that's forming here because they are taking on some of the issues and the whole pesticide issue is something Cesar worked on with the boycotts years ago and it is still present and we are still fighting the effects.

R: Can you say a short word about the organization that is forming?

B: It's called AMA, Alliance of women and the woman farmworker, she works up north in Seville, a little bitty town, she's actually an interesting person to talk to but she had a few women friends that would get together sort of as a support group and they'd talk about a variety of things, children's issues, spousal issues, work issues, and it was just a few people in their living room and then as the word got out it grew and grew and grew and it became a bigger thing and we raised lots of money for her and through the United Church of Christ, we arranged for her to have a salary, a small stipend more than a salary really, to run this group. They lease the discarded school building in Seville from the county for a small amount of money, actually way more than I think it should be, and so they have a place to meet and they do not only women's issues but now some men are getting involved and in the community it has really changed it because for the most part when they started the husbands were not really in favor of their wives getting together and gossiping or whatever they thought they were doing but when they found out how empowering it was and when they speak out on the pesticide issues and they speak out on the issues in the nurseries and when they found that out then they became interested, so it is a very viable organization now and it has a board and everything and it's really sort of changed the whole dynamic of how that very small, closed agriculture community is operating and I think most people wouldn't notice that because you don't see it but it really is community organizing at its best and with no resources up until recently. And Larisa, who works with us has been a big part of empowering them to do the work that they are doing, and it is a little different than the stuff the NFWM usually does but I think it is important for us to sort of make that transition because agriculture doesn't act like it used to act and now there are no big organizing efforts in most places, North Carolina probably has the biggest one, but there are groups of people wanting to do the community organizing, I mean that's what the Coalition of Immokalee Workers started out to be and now they are a huge dynamic force in Florida agriculture but there are other groups there that had the potential even if it is in with its own communities to really make a difference in the lives of people there and I think we as a NFWM need to be able to look at that, I mean it is sort of how we started out. Particularly in Florida, the UFW was not a huge group, it was just a group of people organizing and the UFW came in to help, so it really is that sort of grass roots sort of organizing that I think we can watch for. The Farm Worker Association is another example in Florida of how we have been able to work together in support of things the community are able to do, they don't do labor organizing but they do community organizing around a lot of immigration issues, a lot of health and environmental issues, a lot of pesticide work, those kinds of things, the legislative and public policy issues, a lot more than any of the other groups in this state. They all have their own kind of niche or way that they operate and they have an office here and the Farm Worker Association started the same year I started working here at the Farm Worker Ministry so we kind of

grew up together so we do a lot of work with them and they do a lot of different work, it's not the traditional labor organizing that we support and still support wherever it is. But until that next big leader comes along to organize people in mass somewhere we need to look at the local the community kinds of organizing that is happening, which I think we are doing in various ways. It is a little different in Florida because I think we have so many different groups that other states generally only have one main group and we have a few of them so without the UFW we don't have the point organization we use to resource, I don't know it might be better because it has more direct effect on communities. So I think hey it's pretty positive but I think we do need to look at, and I know the board meeting is supposed to talk some about where do we go from here, what happens next, and I think there has been some good ideas from what little we have been able to talk about. How do we see our mission? Because it is very different from when we started and our mission statement said We support the United Farmworkers, or we support the farmworkers struggling for self as embodied by the United Farmworkers.

R: And that was in '71?

B: Uh yea, and then we sort of added FLOC and that was a struggle and then we just had to follow the way the workers were organizing.

R: Seems like an appropriate model of transitioning your mission.

B:Yea

R: Exciting

B: It is exciting, um it's sort of more, well I don't know about more, It's going back to our beginnings more when we were on the ground more people. When the UFW became a full-fledged Union, you interact with the leaders and take your cues from there, its sort of different when they were an organizing committee. Not better or worse, just different. Personally I think it is more fun when you have the grass roots folks that you work with day in and day out and you can see a lot more results a lot more of what you are spending your time and your energy on.

R: Well thank you so much for sitting and talking to me today.

[After close of recording, conversation continues and they decide to turn the recorder back on in order to get a few more minutes of conversation recorded.]

R:So Bert you were just telling me about the history of the origins of the National Farmworker Ministry coming to North Carolina and we decided that it would make sense that we should go ahead and record that too so if you could just tell me a little bit of that story, that would be great.

B: Yea, Um pretty much the Farm Labor Organizing Committee had an office here in Florida that worked with workers when they were here in the winter, who were under contract in Ohio and Michigan in the summer and they did contract administration and training about the FLOC contracts there when they were here in the winter so in the summer they'd be prepared for negotiations and all that kind of stuff. Um, and at the same time **Fernando Cuevez**, who was with the FLOC staff, Vice President under **Vargo**

(something? Couldn't understand the name) based here in Florida, near Winter Springs garden, or one of those places. Um, was going to North Carolina to see what was happening in particularly the cucumbers, pickles because the growers that had contracts or didn't want to have contracts in Ohio and Michigan were moving a lot of their growing operations to North Carolina. Fernando Cuevez went there with his mission to see how that was all happening and what was happening, I guess as far as a fact finding trek I guess. At that time over Labor Day, we had Hurricane Andrew here in Florida in August, I guess it was '93 and this office did a lot of disaster response and we were friends or partners with a Southern Baptist Response Group that had a big feeding truck and could feed 6,000 meals a day out of this big eighteen wheel kitchen basically. We had just finished working in South Florida when the Hurricane came through North Carolina over the Labor Day weekend and that was the same weekend that Fernando Cuevez was going to migrate back to Florida for the winter. So he called and said they had a Hurricane problem in North Carolina, so my friend Rob Patterson who is a Baptist Minister, we got this big food truck and we went to North Carolina to feed workers in Eastern Carolina that had lost their work and their income and their everything. And Fernando then stayed in North Carolina to help do that, and at the same time met a lot of support people and got connected with the North Carolina council of Churches because they were interested in helping with the disaster. They had a farmworker committee, JoAnne Price was a big part of that, and it sort of turned into more of looking like a more permanent sort of opportunity for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee to have a presence in North Carolina because of Baldemar, I think, and I assume had to discern by then that the pickle industry was going to be based around Mount Olive, North Carolina. He had to follow them there to expand the workers' rights and contracts, so it became more of a permanent idea and that we were going to be here awhile. We in the National Farm Worker Ministry, I was going to North Carolina a couple weeks out of every month to work on the disaster and when that got in place we talked about if FLOC was going to have an office there maybe we should have someone to support their work and see just where it was all going to go. We had a Church of the Brethren volunteer from Germany, Daniel Opocu Was working with me in this office and we sent him to North Carolina to help Fernando and whoever was working there, and he lived with a Presbyterian minister in the Benson area, Warren Bock who is now retired. When he finished his internship, his volunteer 18 months and he had to go back to Germany, we then hired a full time person, Matt, can't remember last name, who took over the office there and since then we've had a person there and it turned into a real office to work with Flock. Since then we've gotten our own office Benson and we moved out of Warren's house and after Matt we hired Lori Khamala who opened the official, official National Farm Worker Ministry office, and she still is in North Carolina. So since then we've had a presence there but it actually all began out of a need to support farmworkers after a disaster. And we did not only the feeding and of course the clothes and all those things that churches give but we also worked with the North Carolina council of Churches, which is why I went every couple of weeks, on some policy changes within the North Carolina legislature that might make it easier for non-North Carolinians, because they were migrants, to access services and supplies and things because they were pretty much denied that after that original hurricane. So that was how we sort of ended up in North Carolina and here we are.

R: So when Lori started to open the office in Durham, was that largely because of the connection with The Council of Churches or National Farm Workers because I know that Laurie was a National Farm

Workers Intern or a Farm Worker Ministry staff person. Do you know how the connection with (missed the name) started?

B: Um, I don't think I can say for sure. My memory is that the Unitarians offered that space and I think it was through, I want to say it was probably through the student organization but I'm not positive. It might've been more than the North Carolina Council of Churches, Laurie could probably tell you that.

R: I will ask her

B: I would ask her because all I really remember is that I didn't have to go there twice a month to do stuff.

R: Well thanks again