

Title of recording: NFWM Interview with Ed Brandt on August 27, 2011

Title of Series: National Farm Worker Ministry 2011 Documentary Project

Interviewer: Ryan Nilsen, NFWM-NC Summer Intern through Duke Divinity School

Interviewee: Ed Brandt, Oregon Farm Worker Ministry

Date and time: 7:20PM on August 27, 2011

Location: Portland State University in Portland, OR

Length of Interview: 43 minutes and 17 seconds

Length of Transcription: 8 pages

Transcriber: Kelley Morgan

Name Abbreviations:

R = Ryan Nilsen

E = Ed Brandt

PCUN = Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste

YAYA = Youth and Young Adults

UFW = United Farm Workers

Interview Summary: In this interview, Ryan Nilsen asks Ed Brandt, long time leader in the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry, how he became involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry, how his 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, Brandt discusses his experience working in Hispanic ministries as a Lutheran minister in Venezuela and Washington state, biblical witnesses to liberation and nonviolence, his involvement with PCUN and their CAPACES leadership institute, the multigenerational nature of the farm worker movement and the new YAYA chapters starting in the Pacific Northwest. He also comments on the current UFW campaign with Darigold, the differences that come with having paid staff in farm worker ministries, and his hopes for the future of the farm worker movement.

R: So this is Ryan Nilsen, sitting with Ed Brandt. We are in Portland, Oregon at the tail end of the board meeting for the National Farm Worker Ministry, and we're currently sitting in a dorm room at Portland State University. It's about 7:20 PM on Saturday, August 27 and we're just doing to have a little, I'll ask you a few questions. So how did you first get involved with the National Farm Worker Ministry, Ed?

E: From about 1975 to 1981, my family and I were involved in Hispanic ministries with

the Lutheran Church in the Yakima Valley, an agricultural area of Washington State. I became acquainted with Paul Kempff, a young man who had recently graduated from Seminex, a Lutheran seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and Paul told me about the National Farm Worker Ministry, especially a couple of persons who were on staff at the time, Richard Cook, who was based in St. Louis, at an office there, also Fred Eyster, who was then staff in California, working with the farm worker ministry in California. At the time, the Lutheran churches that I was working with in the Yakima Valley were more involved in evangelization and direct services, traditional kinds of outreach to the Hispanic community, especially the farm worker community, for example going into labor camps to provide, maybe a Sunday school class for children, English class for the adults, food and clothing, you know, things like that, more of a charity approach. I was involved with 5 different Lutheran congregations in a valley that was about 80 miles long, and so there were a lot of needs, a lot of geographical, uh, space, to cover, and it was really an overwhelming task, you know, to think that you were working with several churches having to do with a lot of human needs, and the more I got involved with farm workers and seeing what they were up against, I saw the need to get at the root causes of their need, the root causes being, you know, lack of voice in the workplace, not having a collective bargaining agreement to protect them, not having a process to air their grievances on the job. And, so, after about six years of working in a more traditional kind of ministry, my family and I decided to leave the Yakima Valley and to settle a little bit closer to our families in the state of Oregon, in the Willamette Valley. We moved in 1981 and, coincidentally, at the time that we were getting established in Oregon, some great pioneers, faithful people named Verne and Rosemary Cooperrider were starting a farm worker support ministry with others, especially David Papen and Gary Munson in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Back in the 1980s, there were farm worker campaigns going on, like, the United Farm Workers was involved in pesticide campaigns, uh, lettuce and grape boycotts, FLOC, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, were organizing tomato and cucumber workers in the Midwest, and the Mid-Willamette Valley Farm Workers' Support Group naturally became involved in some of these national campaigns like the Campbell's Soup boycott, and we were able to invite national leaders such as Baldemar Velasquez, and he came and spoke to us in Oregon, in Salem, Oregon. In June of 1985 was the founding of the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry in the basement of Saint Joseph Catholic Rectory in Salem, Oregon, the Catholic church. Uh, you know, definitely just being involved with farm workers and, uh, their struggle, has an impact on your person, on your individual beliefs, and how you look at ministry, really, and I feel that being a part of the National Farm Worker Ministry has made me more of a nonviolent person, more focused on peace and justice issues.

R: Can you tell me more about how that's happened, or how you feel that you've had that impact? What are some situations in which that's been manifested?

E: Observing the organizing tactics and the life of Cesar Chavez, seeing his approach to life and nonviolence and...you know, that's been key. And the biblical...the biblical witness liberation coming out of the Old Testament, the liberation of an oppressed people, the people of Israel and, uh, you know, that's been very profound as well. I think a specific incident of my work with National Farm Worker Ministry and how it made an

impact on me Back in the late 1900s, or the late 1990s, PCUN, the Farm Workers Union, was involved in organizing workers at the NORPAC Farms, in the Willamette Valley, religious leaders were visiting labor camps to assure the workers that people of faith were behind them, that we were with them in their struggle for better working conditions and better wages, and so on. And a Presbyterian pastor and I were arrested for going into the labor camps, and the growers took it upon themselves to call the Marion County sheriffs to come and arrest us. We were arrested for trespassing, and it became a three-year process of, you know, working with lawyers, working with the farm workers, to build a case. The cases themselves did not come to trial, but we finally settled out of court, and we won a financial settlement. So, this whole process, for me, was definitely a learning process. I learned how long the struggle can be, you know, in our case it was a three-year battle, from 1997 to the middle of the year 2000. So I think just having the right for the faith community to enter labor camps to show support, it took a long time. So from that process, I learned that farm worker justice does, each step, takes effort, it takes patience, it takes time, and it takes a lot of strength to keep going, and we gained that strength from, you know, the power of God, who says that God is on the side of the oppressed, and powerless, and we gained strength through seeing how enduring and patient and diligent the workers themselves are, as they keep coming back. They keep working, you know, to have a better life for themselves and their families. So I think there have been some other personal changes in myself, in me and my involvement with the ministry, with the National Farm Worker Ministry. A big one is ecumenical openness, interfaith awareness. Growing up in more of a traditional conservative Lutheran denomination, I really wasn't all that aware of what other Christian denominations were, or what they were doing, and what their focus was, especially for peace and justice. So the National Farm Worker Ministry has been a real eye-opener, a growing experience, so that I can grow personally and become involved getting to know other expressions of faith, as they're borne out in justice and peace issues. So, in recent years here in the Pacific Northwest, we've been able to do some outreach with the Jewish community and the Muslim community, Buddhists, Baha'i, and other non-Christian faiths. So it's been great to bring more people into the farm workers' struggle and introduce more faith traditions to what ordinary workers are doing, are having to struggle with day in and day out, and to really be a part of their coming out, being a greater participant in the democracy movement of the farm worker, the farm worker struggle.

R: I'm curious. As you began working with other denominations, other churches, other faith traditions, have there been some that you've come into contact with through the National Farm Worker Ministry, the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry that have resisted the type of support that you all are trying to offer to the farm worker movement, perhaps that would like to stick to the more traditional forms of outreach you were describing before, or just some other alternative perspective?

E: Well, here in agricultural communities of the Willamette Valley, some of the Roman Catholic parishes are quite conservative, and growers are quite powerful in their local parishes, and so it's been difficult for the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry to get much Roman Catholic involvement. Nationally, various Roman Catholic orders have been very supportive of the farm worker struggle. But when you get right down to the local

setting and the politics of the local parish, then it's very...much more difficult. We have tried to tell the farm worker story and introduce farm workers into local evangelical congregations so that more of the evangelical, non Catholic community could become a part of the farm worker struggle, but that has been difficult because these denominations, the more conservative evangelical denominations see ministry more as just sharing the Word and, you know, spiritual, rather than a more holistic kind of ministry, a justice ministry. Staying involved over the long haul, I'd like to talk a little bit about that. I think it's the workers themselves who really keep throwing out challenges to us in the farm worker ministry. Year after year, there are new campaigns to be involved with, for example, in the early years of the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry, we were mainly concerned with western Oregon and traditional agriculture like fruits and vegetables. But in the last decade, there have been, as abuses have come up in big feed lots and big dairies outside of western Oregon, in eastern Oregon and eastern Washington, the farm workers themselves have been coming to the unions, to the United Farm Workers saying, "Stand with us. We need collective bargaining, we need better wages, we need benefits on the job, we need safer conditions. We need a collective bargaining agreement that will protect us." And, so, through the struggles that have taken place in eastern Oregon and western Oregon, more of the churches have become educated about how complex Northwest agriculture is, and really how vital the faith participation is in the overall struggle. Just as we need the farm workers to speak to us in our churches, so also they need us to stand with them and to speak with them, you know, to offer our assurance, to offer our friendship, and our solidarity, so that they can keep going in their struggle. So, you know, besides being involved in the union campaigns in eastern Oregon and Washington, the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry has been invited to be a part of the CAPACES leadership institute, which is occurring here in the Willamette Valley in the Woodburn area. PCUN, the farm workers' union, has seen its main focus in this part of the 21st century to train the next generation of farm worker leaders, young people who will take us in through the next 50 years, in making our communities more open, more participatory, and that the citizens themselves can be involved in the process. So, as we're a part of CAPACES, we have opportunities in our religious communities to be financial donors, to be volunteers in the work crews that are taking place to build this new institute, and to work really side-by-side with the farm workers who are building their own structure, and their own leadership institute. So, you know, this provides not only, you know, day-to-day labor, working side-by-side with the farm workers, but it's mutual support. We can provide moral support to one another and with one another. What would I say to those who are, maybe, searching for more information about the National Farm Worker Ministry? The farm workers, just in my 25 years that I've been involved in this movement, the movement has grown tremendously, not only in the numbers of unions today, but the different geographical regions of our country, and working in more ag commodities, you know, tobacco, and fruits and vegetables, and grapes, and dairy and feed lot, ferns, you know, horticulture, nursery stock, you name it. So, just as there's no end to the opportunities to organize workers, there's really no end to ways that people of faith can be involved. We can be involved in advocacy, that is, standing with the farm workers as they are involved in legislative advocacy, be involved in their leadership training for the next generation, just being present to listen to their stories, to affirm who they are and to affirm their struggle, and to really validate them as

people, as people of faith and people who are in charge of their own destiny. Then, as we listen, and we ourselves can interpret their stories to our own faith communities from which we come, and which we serve on a day-to-day basis. So I'm saying that anyone in any faith community, if you have listening skills, if you have fundraising capacities, if you're a good organizer or a good communicator, if you have technological skills and leadership skills, and you want to offer them to a good cause, then the National Farm Worker Ministry is a good place to put those gifts to work, those skills to very good purpose, in promoting justice for farm workers. This is really a movement not only for a variety of denominations, but for a variety of ages and people, and this has been really wonderful for me to see how YAYA is working, and that even just the past couple of days, to be part of a national meeting in which younger people have had a major role in carrying out our meeting, and then leading our meetings as well. So I'm grateful for that opportunity, to see a variety of...a multigenerational movement going on in the farm worker community.

R: Me too.

E: Yeah.

R: I'm curious. Another aspect of the last couple of days has been conversation around dynamics between a local vs. a national emphasis, and really comparing, kind of, local organizing and national organizing. With that dynamic in mind, can you comment on what you've seen in some of the particularities of the work of the National Farm Worker Ministry in Oregon or in the Northwest, through your exposure to what's going on in Florida, North Carolina, California, through these board meetings and the general network you have with the National Farm Worker Ministry?

E: Yeah. Just by having conversations, you learn. You learn from, for example, it was very refreshing and enlightening to hear what Orange County has done year in and year out, with their fundraisers, and how it over the years has become almost an automatic home run for them to raise funds. You know, fundraising is something that we struggle with as a small organization, and so just by hearing what Suzanne is doing in Orange County and the small support committee, you know, we get ideas from that, and the national staff really keeps encouraging us. They give us, through the email blasts, what we can be involved in on a national scope, or a national campaign, whether it be immigration or the Chase Bank campaign, things like that, and so we can take their suggestions and try to tailor them and utilize them right here in our setting in the Pacific Northwest. It really helps us to reach out to the larger labor community and the larger faith community. We as a small ministry, farm worker ministry, cannot do it all, but we can make connections with, for example, Portland Jobs with Justice. When we were not able to do a Chase action, a Chase Bank action, well, they could take it on themselves and they could go to a local bank here in Portland, and really make a statement, and we can do that to some extent with some of the ecumenical organizations, like the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, we can get involved with some of the legislative campaigns having to do with wages or immigration, things like that. So I really can't think of any more examples, but the whole local, regional and national debate or, you know, that issue, is

something that we really continue to struggle with, you know, as a fairly small regional organization, how we can best serve the movement.

R: Another conversation we were having before turning this recorder on was kind of about your personal journey from seminary to where you are today, and the different types of jobs you've had, and you'd said that a bulk of your career hasn't been explicitly Christian ministry, working in the school systems, and farming.

E: Right.

R: So, can you comment on how you've, um, maybe how your understanding of ministry has changed since you were fresh out of seminary, to your involvement today with the National Farm Worker Ministry on a completely volunteer basis?

E: Yeah. Leaving the seminary, I thought that I would be in a, more of a traditional parish, with a traditional congregation, but then being able to go overseas and then work in Venezuela in South America, and in the Yakima Valley with farm workers, that really opened up interest and skills, you know, I became, uh, I had the opportunity to learn a second language, to become more aware of different cultures, not only overseas, but right here in the United States, and so it got me out of the walls of a more comfortable church out into the community, and then, you know, having the opportunity to be in the public school system for over 25 years, earning our own salary, our own support. We weren't dependent upon a local church for our income. So we were able to be a little more prophetic, more out there as we were, you know, confronting the powers in the churches and in the local agricultural communities. We could speak about injustices that were occurring, and we could stand more freely with the workers who were...who were up against that injustice. So, being kind of like a worker /priest, with our own self-support, our own salaries, it gave us the freedom to be more prophetic, as I said. So over the years, we've been able to continue to be involved in some local churches, not in a leadership capacity, but more of like a lay member, and we have been able to introduce the farm worker justice concerns into local congregations' programs and budgets and things like that.

R: Another thing you told me about when we were talking was kind of the transition, I guess over the last 12 years or so, with the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry's hiring of a director, and then not having a director now. How does having, you know, paid staff and having that kind of capacity affect the work of your ministry versus what you're doing right now at the moment?

E: We were, for about 10 years, the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry had paid staff, either full-time or half-time, and we had 4 different directors, and all of them brought unique skills, very helpful skills to what was needed here in the Pacific Northwest. They were able to bring organizing capacity, they were able to reach out to more different denominations, based on their own individual faith background. For example, you know, over the course of our 4 different directors, one was a Presbyterian, one was a Roman Catholic, one was a United Church of Christ minister, one was a Quaker. So each one

was able to reach out to their own...to the people that they were comfortable with, and so on. I think a pitfall of having a paid staff person for we as board members and as members, volunteers is that we, you know, we let the paid staff do all the work. It's kind of sometimes what happens in a local congregation, you know, frequently lay people think, Well, what are we paying the pastor for? To do the work of the church. So while over a 10-year period, the paid staff could help us reach out more and have more of a professional website and so on, the past year and the past year and a half, more of our members and more of our board members have been encouraged to really step up and do the work of this ministry. I mentioned John Nichols, who has been a part of our meetings the past couple of days. I was not able as board chair to go up to Washington, but you know, he had the time, the flexibility in his schedule so that he could go up to eastern Washington even though he worked as a chemist in a local lab, he could take time off and go up to visit the dairy in eastern Washington, and he could go to Evergreen State College and support the YAYA group with some of their actions. So this is just one example of a board member who's really done the work of a staff person, a paid staffer, and who has, you know, really volunteered, taken his own time, to go to a different part of our region, and to support farm workers and also support farm worker advocates as well. And, you know, I could name a number of other board members who are doing the same thing, working on some of our financial, our treasury, fundraising things, uh, who are stepping up and working in legislative advocacy work and things like that.

R: Bringing in the dairy...uh...

E: Uh-huh.

R: We basically had a march today that we participated in with workers from Ruby Ridge. I was wondering if you could comment on that situation a little bit and your understanding of it and how the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry is involved in supporting these workers.

E: Well, this struggle has gone on for over 2 years, since way back in early 2009, and the firings at this large dairy near the Tri-Cities, Washington and the Columbia Basin, took place because farm workers were standing up for themselves and they were saying, These conditions are not good, and so we choose the United Farm Workers as our union to work with us, so that we can have a contract, and you know, it started out with just a few workers being fired, and now 15 have been fired over the course of 2 years. In the early days of those firings, John Mundson, our executive director, sent out an appeal, an immediate appeal, to get funding from local churches, so that we could help the workers who had been fired. It was kind of like a wage so they could continue to pay their rent and feed their families, and buy clothes for the kids, and things like that. So we were able to raise several thousand dollars with that. And over the 2-year time, you know, we have had some actions, some vigils, that have taken place out at the dairy, in which we have the dairy, uh, the workers come and speak with us, speak to us, and then we deliver, or at least we try to communicate to the dairy owners much as we did with the Darigold plant today, and so we had hoped today that we could get a hearing from Darigold, which is a major milk cooperative of several hundred dairies here in the Pacific Northwest that

we could...that they would want to listen, that they would be open to hearing what some workers in a single dairy are up against. But Darigold has chosen not to even listen.

R: So do you know what the next steps will be for this particular campaign/situation?

E: We did have an action today in Portland, Oregon, and Portland is the site of one of the Darigold plants; it's a processing plant. The headquarters of Darigold is in Seattle, Washington, and so on September 2, supporters and workers from the state of Washington, primarily, will be going to the headquarters of Darigold in Seattle to try to get...to again, get another hearing, to try to speak with the president of the company, to get that person involved, in this particular labor conflict. So over the past couple of years, we have tried emails, we have tried, you know, making phone calls to the legal counsel of Darigold. There was even a meeting between our director, John Mundson, and their legal counsel, Steve Rowe. They'd talk, but there was really no further action after the talk. There is a legal case against the dairy for the firing of the workers, and then a countersuit, so this is in the courts at this time.

R: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to say or any stories you'd like to tell?

E: Really, I think that's, uh, you know, the years have really passed quickly, you know. We've been involved in this for a couple of decades, and it's always great to have the support of the National Farm Worker Ministry and their coming to the Northwest, to assure us that they're a part of our struggle and we're a part of the national struggle, and so it's been a very good relationship.

R: OK. Well, thank you so much for your time, and sitting and talking with me this evening.

E: Thank you.

R: For being willing to participate in this project.

E: OK, thanks.