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# Essential Farm Workers Deserve Essential Benefits

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## Safe Working Conditions and a Living Wage

In the middle of a religious debate, a scribe once asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered him with not one but two essential commandments: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ *and* ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matthew 22:34-40) (NRSV). Jesus reminds his followers that love is the essential work to which Christians are called. What does it mean to love our neighbor when the farm workers who grow, harvest and package the food that nourishes each of us do not receive enough wages to feed themselves and their families?

## Farm Workers in the COVID-19 Crisis

There are an estimated 2 to 2 ½ million farm workers<sup>1</sup>, including roughly 250,000 contracted guest workers<sup>2</sup>, laboring in United States fields each year. Our food system and our health are dependent on their skilled labor. During the COVID-19 crisis, farm workers were considered essential workers, increasing their exposure to unsafe workplace conditions so that we could eat and they could receive their wages. In addition to the ongoing dangers of farm work—pesticide exposure, dangerous heat conditions, sexual harassment, inadequate housing, etc.—farm workers have not been provided face masks, adequate hand-washing facilities or the safety of physical distancing in overcrowded working and living conditions. Besides dangerous working conditions, farm workers continue to receive low wages. In 2018, the most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey reported that farm workers’ average *annual* income was between \$17,500 and \$19,999, with one-third of farm workers reporting family incomes below the poverty line<sup>3</sup>. These vulnerabilities are compounded by the fact that farm workers are not guaranteed overtime pay, sick leave or health insurance.

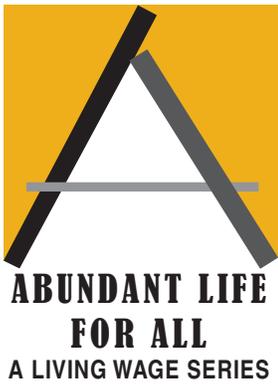
The present injustices that plague agricultural labor in the United States are rooted in a long history of farm workers being systematically left out of legal protections that were put in place for other workers. In 1938, farm workers were not included in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which guaranteed minimum wage for each hour worked, overtime pay and required payroll records for employees. In 1966, the FLSA was revised to include most farm workers in minimum wage protections (except for small farms) but again, not overtime pay<sup>4</sup>. The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 provided some health regulations but also included dangerous loopholes that excluded farm workers employed by small operations with less than ten employees.

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1. Farmworker Justice, “Selected Statistics on Farmworkers 2015-16 Data”, 2019, [farmworkerjustice.org/sites/default/files/resources/NAWS%20Data%20FactSheet%20005-13-2019%20-%20final.pdf](https://farmworkerjustice.org/sites/default/files/resources/NAWS%20Data%20FactSheet%20005-13-2019%20-%20final.pdf), Accessed June 11, 2020
2. JBS International, Inc. “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015-2016: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers”, January 2018, [foreign-laborcert.doleta.gov/pdf/PerformanceData/2019/H-2A\\_Selected\\_Statistics\\_FY2019\\_Q4.pdf](https://foreign-laborcert.doleta.gov/pdf/PerformanceData/2019/H-2A_Selected_Statistics_FY2019_Q4.pdf), , Accessed June 10, 2020
3. Ibid.
4. Farmworker Justice, “US Labor Law for Farmworkers ”, [farmworkerjustice.org/advocacy-and-programs/us-labor-law-farmworkers](https://farmworkerjustice.org/advocacy-and-programs/us-labor-law-farmworkers). Accessed June 10, 2020



**People of faith have an opportunity to respond in love by addressing the COVID-19 crisis in ways that lead to long-term change for farm workers' working and living conditions."**



The Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act of 1983 (MSPA) became the primary labor law to protect migrant and seasonal workers but left out H-2A workers (short-term immigrant contract workers) and employees at year-round operations including dairies and greenhouses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, farm workers were still being left out of federal aid packages. And yet, while they have payroll taxes withheld from their pay checks and are not receiving important legal benefits, both documented and undocumented farm workers continue working and contributing to their local U.S. economies.

## **Opportunities for Action:**

While COVID-19 has exposed long-standing issues affecting farm workers, it has also put farm workers in the spotlight as “essential” workers. Farm worker organizations and their supporters such as the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM) are amplifying their call of justice for farm workers. People of faith have an opportunity to respond in love by addressing the COVID-19 crisis in ways that lead to long-term change for farm workers’ working and living conditions. For example, current advocacy opportunities at the state level include:

- New York State legislative revisions to include farm workers in labor laws.
- Washington State advocacy for stronger statewide farm worker protection criteria.
- The Coalition of Immokalee Workers efforts in Florida for access to health care and multilingual emergency informational resources.
- Oregon State advocacy to include farm workers and their families in child care provisions.

These efforts can also join together with the needed changes at the federal level, such as comprehensive immigration reform, full labor rights, protected worker wages, benefits, child care and union representation.

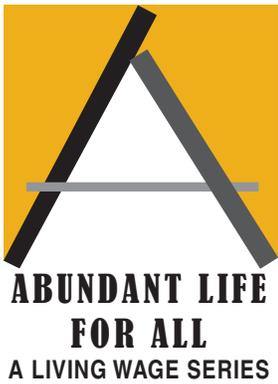
United Methodist Women can build and strengthen its partnership with [NFWM](#) by:

1. [Supporting farm workers through education](#)<sup>5</sup>  
Educate yourself and others about farm worker issues such as gender-based violence, food justice and the impact of climate change on farm workers.
2. [Supporting farm workers through advocacy](#)<sup>6</sup>  
Connect with farm worker organizing groups to sign petitions, post on social media, make phone calls, deliver letters to store managers and participate in other public witness opportunities.
3. [Supporting farm workers through legislation](#)<sup>7</sup>  
Farm worker legislation is introduced in each Congress to address the systemic issues behind wages, housing, guest worker regulations, heat stress, immigration reform and regulation, pesticide exposure and farm worker organizing protections. United Methodist Women, at national and conference levels, can contact their Congressional representatives through phone calls, emails, petitions, sign on letters, etc., to influence their votes.

5. National Farm Worker Ministry, “Resource Center”, [nfwm.org/resource-center/](https://nfwm.org/resource-center/). Accessed June 11, 2020

6. National Farm Worker Ministry, “Action Alerts”, [nfwm.org/category/action-alerts/](https://nfwm.org/category/action-alerts/). Accessed June 11, 2020

7. Ibid.



#### 4. Supporting farm workers as consumers

- a. The [Fair Food Program](#) is a worker-driven, consumer-powered initiative designed to protect farm workers. Support fair labor standards by buying from participating retailers.<sup>8</sup>
- b. The [Equitable Food Initiative](#) (EFI) works with growers to implement best practices for safe and fair working conditions and wage bonuses. When shopping look for the EFI label on fruits and vegetables.<sup>9</sup>

#### 5. Supporting farm workers on the ground

Connect directly with farm worker organizing groups. Unions, coalitions, support committees, associations, etc., and their allies are always working on farm worker issues. To see a list of who these are and where they are located, go to [nfwm.org/get-involved/events-near-you/](https://nfwm.org/get-involved/events-near-you/)

#### 6. Supporting farm workers by joining with other faith partners

To connect with other faith partners who are part of this work, go to [nfwm.org/faith-based-partners/member-and-supporting-organizations/](https://nfwm.org/faith-based-partners/member-and-supporting-organizations/)

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National Farm Worker Ministry is a faith-based organization committed to justice for and empowerment of farm workers. For more about this organization, go to [nfwm.org](https://nfwm.org)

8. National Farm Worker Ministry, "Coalition of Immokalee Workers", [nfwm.org/farm-workers/farmworker-partners/coalition-of-immokalee-workers/](https://nfwm.org/farm-workers/farmworker-partners/coalition-of-immokalee-workers/). Accessed June 11, 2020

9. National Farm Worker Ministry, "Equitable Food Initiative", [nfwm.org/farm-workers/farmworker-partners/equitable-food-initiative/](https://nfwm.org/farm-workers/farmworker-partners/equitable-food-initiative/). Accessed June 11, 2020



[unitedmethodistwomen.org/living-wages](https://unitedmethodistwomen.org/living-wages)

*Abundant Life for All* is a series addressing aspects of the United Methodist Women Living Wage for All Campaign for use by members in programs for education and action. Edited by elmira Nazombe.