

## ***Commentary on Exodus 3:1-15***

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### ***Crying Out From the “Brickyard”***

“I have observed the misery of my people...and I have come down to deliver them,” God says to Moses from the burning bush. When no one else hears or cares about those who are oppressed, God does. And God invites us to hear and respond as well.

Biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann helpfully illumines the economic and theological dynamics of the brickyard from which the Hebrew slaves cried out in their misery to God, relating them to our contemporary world in his book *Living Toward a Vision* (New York: UCC Press, 1982.)

(The brickyard) is a place of competent production where the production schedule is taken with great seriousness. The brickyard is also a place of coercion and profit. It is profit for the people who own and sell the bricks and set the production schedule. But for the people who make the bricks, it is a place of coercion. That is, they are there to meet other people’s standards, to knuckle under to others’ demands that they do not share...The gap between the people of profit and people who are coerced is not an accident of the system, but is built into the design of the system. Most often the story of the brickyard is put out in the company literature. Remarkable, the biblical story of the brickyard is told from the perspective of the coerced.” (p. 54)

Brueggemann explains that idolatry is at the heart of oppression and coercion. He suggests that the drama of the brickyard “has become the place where the question of power is asked: ‘Who is in charge here?’ And the question is answered: ‘My name is Let-my-people-go!’ And Let-my-people-go is now in charge... The brickyard is “under new management.” (p. 57)

### ***A Human Rights Victory***

On March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and Taco Bell Corporation reached an historic agreement that concretely addresses the sub-poverty wages and working conditions of farmworkers and is the first step toward moving the fast food industry toward a new way of doing business that respects human rights. Upon reaching this agreement, the farmworkers called for an end to the Taco Bell boycott that they had initiated almost four years earlier, a boycott which the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted to support in 2002.

This historic success would not have been possible without the strong witness of Presbyterians across the country. Many people wrote letters, prayed, fasted, protested, and provided hospitality or material support to the farmworkers as they sought to establish socially responsible purchasing by Taco Bell, a part of Yum Brands, the largest fast-food company in the world, through support of the Taco Bell boycott. As a result of these efforts Yum Brands has stepped forward to work together with the farmworkers,

not only agreeing to meet every request of the workers but also leading the way toward industry-wide support for socially responsible purchasing. [Details on the agreement <http://www.pcusa.org/fairfood/agreement.htm>]

The human rights victory of the Taco Bell boycott established several key new principles that, taken together, represent a significant step toward social responsibility in the fast-food industry. But Taco Bell is only one major buyer among many, and the impact of its commitment to those new principles will fall only on those workers who pick tomatoes for Taco Bell.

### ***The Journey Toward Promised Land***

While farmworkers who pick for Florida suppliers of Taco Bell have seen their income per bucket almost double as a result of the March agreement, farmworkers picking tomatoes for Florida-based growers that do not supply Taco Bell still receive 40 – 45 cents for every 32 pound bucket of tomatoes picked. The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Labor illustrates the persistent poverty of farmworkers and their families. For the two calendar-year period 2000-2001, the average individual income range from all sources, as well as from farm work only, was \$10,000 - \$12,499. (U.S. Department of Labor, National Agricultural Workers Survey, March 2005, p. 47).

Further, all farmworkers are explicitly excluded from the National Labor Relations Act so growers are under no obligation to dialogue with the workers they employ and the workers have no recourse to the National Labor Relations Board for adjudication of grievances.

Before calling the boycott of Taco Bell in April 2001 the farmworkers worked for eight years to address sweatshop conditions in the fields. They tried hunger strikes, marches, work stoppages and more. But the conditions remained intractable as long as they focused only on the growers, because the conditions were produced by a system of purchasing that actually contributed to the depression of wages. For change to occur, the workers had to go “up” the supply chain and critically examine the purchasing practices of large corporate food buyers like McDonald’s, Yum Brands (Taco Bell’s parent company), and Walmart.

In its 2004 report, *Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture*, Oxfam America explained

Squeezed by buyers of their produce, growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farmworkers they employ. Many farmers view their labor expenses as the only area where they are able to make significant cuts (*Like Machines in the Fields: Workers Without Rights in American Agriculture*, Oxfam America, 2004, p. 36).

Because fast-food companies are profiting from the exploitation of farmworkers in their supply chains, they have a moral and ethical responsibility to end that exploitation – just as Taco Bell is doing.

### ***The Campaign for Fair Food***

So clearly, though great strides have been made with the CIW-Taco Bell agreement, there more work to be done! Of course the Presbyterian Church continues to advocate legislatively for the full inclusion of farmworkers in the National Labor Relations Act, as we have for generations (the act was passed by Congress in 1938). Meanwhile, together with the CIW we successfully persuaded Yum Brands, Taco Bell's parent company, to establish a powerful new model of corporate socially responsible practices that make an immediate, positive difference in farmworker wages and working conditions. So we continue to build on that precedent-setting success in the ongoing Campaign for Fair Food seeks to use the CIW-Taco Bell agreement as a model for bringing socially responsible purchasing to the entire fast-food industry. Right now Presbyterians are contacting the CEOs of McDonald's, Subway, and Burger King by letter to urge them to meet with the CIW and discuss how they can implement these principles in their own supply chains. [Sample letters and background <http://www.pcusa.org/fairfood/action.htm>].

The Presbyterian Church (USA) prayerfully participates in this ongoing campaign for fair food with the CIW because we believe that

The covenant of work entails mutual responsibility between employers and employees, producers and consumers. None of us works independently. Employees, employers, and customers need each other, depend upon each other, and owe each other help beyond the letter of the law. Our partners in work, even when we cannot see them or know them personally, deserve our respect and our attention to their needs" (*God's Work in Our Hands*, General Assembly, PC(USA), 1995).

Moses was at work tending his flocks when he heard God's voice from the burning bush. He was happily married and far from the struggles of the Egyptian brickyard. But God's voice broke through his daily routine and demanded that he hear and respond to the people's cries.

Now, the workers do not need us to be Moses for them. But they do need us to understand and use the power we have. Lucas Benitez, a farmworker and one of the leaders of the CIW explains, "It's very important that we ask consumers for support in the ongoing campaign for fair food because for this issue they have the final word – they can choose to buy or not to buy." As followers of the God of the Exodus, the One who makes a way where there is no way, the farm workers have invited us to join them in their struggle for dignity and decent wages. Will we?

As Presbyterians we know that ultimately the one who is "in charge" is the God of the Exodus who makes a way where there is no way. And so we live with the strong hope that our witness will help *all* corporate food buyers and the growers who supply them to understand themselves as responsible partners in the covenant of work and will work

with the farmworkers to establish supply chain practices that ensure the human rights of agricultural laborers.

*Copies of “God’s Work in Our Hands” and a study guide may be obtained by contacting Social Witness Policy Office at 1-888-728-7228, x5823. For more information on the Campaign for Fair Food and the history of the Taco Bell boycott see [www.pcusa.org/fairfood](http://www.pcusa.org/fairfood).*

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