

Reaching Out to the Field

Ki Do Ahn

Chaplain, thank you so much for your help. You are my only connection to the world outside of farmwork. When you come and say hello, I feel really connected with you and the world out there. It is also a refreshing moment.

This is a comment that one of my student chaplains has heard from farmworkers many times. In my CPE training, I have worked with Workforce Chaplaincy to train chaplains serving farmworkers in many states, including California and Arizona. Workforce Chaplaincy is a non-profit organization based in Visalia, California. It works with companies to support their employees in Central California. Workforce Chaplaincy works primarily with agricultural companies to support the spiritual needs of their workers in the United States.

The farmworkers are from Mexico and Guatemala, and they are in the United States legally on temporary agricultural H-2A visas for three months to nine months each year. Chaplains are involved from the stage of recruitment in Mexico and Guatemala and travel with the workers in the United States. The typical daily life of the workers is waking up, having breakfast, going to the field and working with a break for lunch, coming back to their housing, then having dinner and sleeping. They normally don't have contact with anyone other than their fellow workers except for site supervisors

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and chaplains. They speak Spanish and hardly any English. The chaplains are bilingual in Spanish and English. The size of the camp sites/inns/renovated housing areas is diverse based on the size of the farm. Some sites are in the middle of farm fields, and workers stay in a large house with eight housemates. The farm company provides transportation from the housing area to the field. At some sites, the company provides food, but at other sites the workers need to cook for themselves.

One of the crucial needs of the workers is dealing with loneliness. Most of them have family members in their home country, and they are here to earn money. What they earn here in the United States is probably about seven to ten times more than they could earn in their own country. When they are here in the United States, it is hard for them to visit their home country because of the high cost. In this situation, even though they talk to their families by phone or video via smartphones, they deal with feelings of loneliness.

So, the chaplain plays a very important role with the workers in this situation. The work of the chaplain is to visit the workers and to be with them. Sometimes, it involves just saying hello, having coffee with them, eating a snack, just chatting, or offering financial counseling, emotional support, and spiritual support. As the chaplains visit them regularly starting with their recruitment in another country, trust is established by the time they are in the United States and working.

One of the ways that chaplains provide spiritual care is by visiting farmworkers regularly, sometimes daily or weekly throughout the season. Normally, this involves coordinating the visiting time with the site supervisor, knocking on doors, and introducing the chaplaincy and its availability to the workers. One of the chaplains who was in CPE training with me had visited a camp site regularly, and he stopped by every room and said hello to the residents. Sometimes, he had a short conversation with them. Sometimes, he would just say hello.

One day, when he visited a room with several farmworkers, one of them approached him and said to the chaplain, "Chaplain, thank you so much for your help. You are my only connection to the world outside of farmwork. When you come and say hello, I feel really connected with you and the world out there. It is also a refreshing moment." When the chaplain heard this, he was very moved. The chaplain shared with me that sometimes he felt that he was doing nothing except saying hello to people, but with this

experience, he realized how much the visit of the chaplain means to the farmworkers. It is not just saying hello, it is not just emotional support—it represents connection to the world and, sometimes, it means hope for them.

In my understanding, chaplains also play very different roles in this setting. This is because chaplains are the only people who visit workers regularly other than site supervisors. Chaplains sometimes play the role of social workers, case managers, mediators among workers, and managers of conflict between the company and workers. For example, there was trouble over the food provided to workers at one of the sites. The next day, workers refused to go to work because they wanted to make sure that the company addressed it. One of the chaplains who visited there regularly went there and talked to the workers and acted as their advocate with the company. At the same time, the company worked with the chaplains in order to serve the workers better in the future. After the mediation of the chaplain between the company and the workers, the issue was resolved and both parties were satisfied with the result.

Chaplains also provide ministry through a social networking service (SNS). New employees are given the SNS information when they are recruited, and they can request a phone call, a physical visit, or consultation through the SNS.

I think this ministry is a good example of the practice of “being with people where they are.” Farmworkers are new to the United States, and they need a lot of support to be here. The company that hires them provides as much support as possible, but chaplains meet the farmworkers where they are. Chaplains go to the places where they are staying and talk to them and assess their needs. Sometimes, the chaplains become family for workers in the United States.

For more information, visit the CPE of Central California website (<http://www.cpecentralca.org>) and the Workforce Chaplaincy website (<http://www.workforcechaplaincy.org/>). Also see the online video by MedWatch Today (<https://www.yourcentralvalley.com/med-watch-today/medwatch-today-chaplains-in-the-valley-are-helping-immigrant-workers-cope/>).