

June 1, 2018

Dear Pastor,

What is a farmworker's life worth in Whatcom County?

You may remember that last summer 600 "guest" farmworkers in the H2A program were shipped to a Sumas blueberry farm from a California farm with expired work Visas. They were provided fenced lodging where they were locked in at night ("for their protection"). They received inadequate food and water (to the extent that workers were hungry and dehydrated). While working 12 hour days, they were exposed to 80 degree heat and a hazardous air quality from the forest fires in British Columbia. On August 4, 2018, one worker, Honesto Silva Ibarra, collapsed in the field while working, after complaining of severe headaches and being denied medical attention. Co-workers tried to seek medical attention. A local farmworker family was called by Ibarra and they rushed to the farm and removed him, carrying him to their van and transporting him to the hospital where he was treated for diabetes and dehydration and sent to Harborview where he died two days later.

The people of Bellingham and Whatcom County responded with food, water, tents, sleeping bags and other resources for 140 workers who had been fired when they stopped working to find out what happened to Ibarra. The workers called a priest and two pastors that they knew about, who came to them and provided Bible Study, prayers, and spiritual support. Assumption Catholic Church held a Mass for the workers.

Many State agencies have been involved in reviewing the situation at the farm which has been found not negligent in the death of Ibarra, since he did not die there. Eventually, the Visa paperwork was processed and workers able to be returned to their homes in Mexico, with the help of the Mexican Consulate, local residents and the farm.

This summer corporate farms are testing how much Washington State will accept in the mistreatment of farm laborers who are brought in through H2A to replace our area's farm labor force.

National Farm Worker Ministry Northwest (affiliated with the National Farm Worker Ministry), an interfaith organization which has worked on behalf of farmworkers since the 1920s, and who supported Cesar Chavez in the Grape Boycott during the 1960s,) is working with Community to Community Development to be ready with understanding, information and ministers who will speak out, pray and lead. This will

support a non-violence response based on our multi-faith beliefs about the sacredness of human lives and God's presence among the poor.

We are asking you to become an active part in creating a spiritual moral force in Whatcom County that stands with the workers and expresses a multi-faith inter-denominational outrage at the death of even one farmworker. We need to be reminded by Ministers, Priests, Rabbis and People of Faith that all human lives are valued in our County.

You can help lead this vital work by joining with our small multi-faith group that formed locally in 2013. We are asking you to come and provide the teachings that answer the question: What is a human life worth... in every setting and especially in the fields of Whatcom County. We would like you to be prepared to talk (for three to five minutes) about your perspective based on the teachings of your faith related to farmworkers who continue to be the poor and oppressed among us. From this discussion we expect to form a broad overview of relevant religious and spiritual teachings.

Meeting Notice

This meeting will be on Thursday, June 14th at 1:30-2:30 PM at the First Christian Church, 495 E. Bakerview Road, Bellingham, WA 98226, 360-734-6820., Bellingham, WA.

We will meet again on July 12th and August 4th to plan how to minister to the workers while they are here.

Please let me know if you can come. You can reach me at thadallen53@msn.com. My phone number is 360-223-3135. If this is new information for you and you would like to chat with me before June 14th, please make an appointment with me at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Thad Allen
National Farm Workers Ministry Northwest
(Whatcom County Multi Faith Cluster)