

## The National Farm Worker Ministry as Freirian Apprenticeship

Ryan Nilsen  
Duke Divinity School

**Abstract.** In “Education, liberation and the church,” Paulo Freire proposes apprenticeship as a model of liberative education for people of faith who begin to discover the ways in which they benefit from the systemic oppression of other human beings. Using ten oral history interviews I conducted with National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM) staff, board members, and volunteer supporters, I propose NFWM as a historical and contemporary example of Freirian apprenticeship which offers valuable insight to those seeking to promote similar educational experiences.

*So it's my sense that many of the churches are imprisoned in a kind of middle class cultural captivity, if you will, and we need for a self-interested thing to connect with farmworkers and others that are marginalized.<sup>1</sup>*

*The farmworker ministry has been like a continuous going to school, you know, always learning.<sup>2</sup>*

In his 1984 essay titled “Education, liberation and the church,” Paulo Freire discusses a particular model of liberative education for formerly *naïve* people of faith who begin to discover the ways in which they benefit from the systemic oppression of other human beings. He explains that they can either choose to become knowing and *shrewd* beneficiaries of this oppression or enter into what Freire describes as a difficult period of *apprenticeship* through new forms of relationship and active solidarity with their oppressed neighbors. Only by personally knowing and joining with the oppressed in their struggle to transform the social order, he suggests, will they experience their own transformation and come to share in what he describes as the *prophetic* faith of Jesus Christ.

While Freire opens the essay explaining that “we cannot discuss churches, education or the role of the churches in education other than historically,”<sup>3</sup> he neglects to provide historical examples of such apprenticeships or actual accounts of what people learn through them. In this paper, I offer the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM) as one powerful example of Freirian apprenticeship which can provide insight into what exactly apprentices might learn specifically through building relationships with farmworkers who are organizing to change an oppressive agricultural system. In the summer of 2011, I completed ten oral history interviews with NFWM staff, board members, and volunteer supporters in celebration of NFWM’s fortieth anniversary as a national organization.<sup>4</sup> I learned from the interviewees how the ministry evolved over almost a

---

<sup>1</sup> David Wildman, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Olgha Sierra Sandman, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Freire, “Education, liberation, and the church,” *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation*, eds. Jeff Astley et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 169.

<sup>4</sup> I undertook this project as an intern and later as a volunteer with NFWM in the summer of 2011 in order to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the organization. I conducted interviews in Durham and Greensboro, NC;

century from a network of charity-based state Migrant Ministries starting in the early 1920s to being a national organization explicitly committed to supporting farmworker organizing.<sup>5</sup> Today the ministry's work engages non-farmworkers in educational processes rooted in personal relationships and acts of solidarity far more than it involves non-farmworkers giving charity to farmworkers. The interviewees' stories and reflections offer a wide variety of articulations of how peoples' lives and faiths can be transformed by Freirian apprenticeship and thus serve as a valuable resource to any religious educator who seeks to promote a similar model of liberative education.

### **“Middle Class Cultural Captivity” and the Farmworker Movement**

While his essay is most explicitly about liberative education in Latin American churches, Freire makes clear that his words should not be limited to that context. He explains,

Europeans and North Americans, with their technological societies, have no need to go to Latin America in order to become prophetic. They only need to go to the outskirts of their big cities, without ‘naiveté’ or ‘shrewdness’, and there they will find... themselves confronted with various expressions of the Third World.<sup>6</sup>

The agricultural system illustrates the enduring truth of this claim perhaps better than any other aspect of U.S. society, even quite literally in that the majority of its workers today are undocumented immigrants from rural regions of Mexico and Central America. Much of the U.S. population, however, remains in all but total naiveté about the systemically substandard working and living conditions which shape the lives of those who produce the agricultural commodities that nearly everyone consumes.<sup>7</sup>

Freire would argue that these agricultural consumers, knowingly or unknowingly, are deeply formed by their participation in such a dehumanizing economic system and need to be reformed in a way he describes metaphorically as death and resurrection. He writes,

This new apprenticeship will violently break down the elitist concept of existence which they had absorbed... The *sine qua non* which the apprenticeship demands is that, first of all, they really experience their own Easter, that they die as elitists so as to be resurrected on the side of the oppressed...<sup>8</sup>

---

Gainesville, Orlando, and Deland, FL; Chicago, IL; and Portland, OR. NFWM covered travel costs, and NFWM staff selected the interviewees for the project from a large pool of staff and supporters in order to represent a range of experiences among those involved with the organization. The transcripts of the interviews are archived with the NFWM Archives in the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University. For more information about the project, see “Forty Years of NFWM: The Cost & Joys of Discipleship,” National Farm Worker Ministry, <http://nfwm.org/forty-years-of-nfwm/> (accessed September 16, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> For more information on this history of NFWM, see Pat Hoffman, *Ministry of the Dispossessed: Learning from the Farm Worker Movement* (Los Angeles: Wallace Press, 1987); Sydney Smith, *Grapes of Conflict* (Pasadena: Hope Publishing House, 1987); and *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*.

<sup>6</sup> Freire, 185.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on agricultural labor in the U.S., see Charlie Thompson and Melinda Wiggins, eds. *The Human Cost of Food* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); United Farm Workers and Bon Appetit Management Company Foundation, “Inventory of farmworker issues and protections in the United States” (Palo Alto: BAMCO Foundation, September 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Freire, 170.

Freire associates this transformation figuratively with both religious conversion and also the single most determinative event of the Christian narrative. He also suggests that oppressed peoples must lead the powerful in this process by inviting them to join their struggle for a larger social transformation. In other words, the powerful must apprentice themselves to the oppressed for their own liberation.

Without ever explicitly mentioning Freire, several NFWM interviewees articulate a remarkably similar understanding of farmworkers' ability to lead those assumed to be powerful into experiences of transformation through inviting them into their struggle for justice. David Wildman explains:

So if undocumented Latino workers that are about as marginalized and oppressed with very few resources in a climate that is hostile to immigrants can nevertheless affect change from multi-billion dollar corporations then there certainly is a God. The weak do "shame the strong," as Paul says in First Corinthians. And God repeatedly chooses the weak to say that we've turned God's values and God's creation upside down as a society. And they are taking the lead in turning it right side up again. ... And so I've found that it's in introducing middle class churches to the struggles of farm workers that they suddenly not only learn about justice but they also learn about what it means to have a joyful faith and hope. ... It's not like optimism or something that I think things are going to go well. But really like in the face of growers, often times folks that are armed and that they could lose their jobs and someone who talks with the union reps suddenly finds that like they're fired the next day. That in those conditions, nevertheless, that community of farm workers is far better equipped to celebrate the joy that we have, living day to day, and the moments when we come together and things change than middle class communities with far more resources, but fear that they might lose those resources and that safety and security they think that comes from that middle class standard. So it's my sense that many of the churches are imprisoned in a kind of middle class cultural captivity, if you will, and we need for a self-interested thing to connect with farm workers and others that are marginalized. And it's in working together that we discover that common joy of being around a table together.<sup>9</sup>

Fear can cause people to prioritize their imagined security over the basic dignity of other human beings, distort their understanding of justice, and inhibit their ability to have faith. Those who have little material security may have more freedom to be honest about the dehumanizing effects of the system and fight to transform it. Further, to be actively involved in such struggle demands faith because there is often little evidence to suggest that it might succeed.

Other interviewees communicate a similar understanding less directly through describing the purposes and forms their work takes. Sam Trickey celebrates NFWM for being "a diversion from consumption,"<sup>10</sup> creating alternative avenues for more humanizing relationships between workers and consumers. NFWM's somewhat countercultural commitment to taking the lead

---

<sup>9</sup> Wildman, 10. David Wildman is the Executive Director for Human Rights and Racial Justice of the United Methodist Church's General Board of Global Ministries and a current NFWM board member from New York, New York.

<sup>10</sup> Sam Trickey, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 13. Trickey is a professor of Physics and longtime NFWM board member from Gainesville, Florida.

from farmworkers was a development of almost fifty years of more charity-based ministry<sup>11</sup> and can be challenging for many entering into the ministry. Dave Austin explains, “Being an ally means that if there’s an organization of workers, we don’t need to go off and identify how we can help them. They can tell us what we can do.”<sup>12</sup> Eighty four year old Olgha Sandman describes coming to this realization herself in the late 1960s, saying, “Now, without using these words, what the farmworkers were saying is that you don’t need to... sit around a table and plan for us. We are going to plan it. And it made a lot of sense to me because they knew better than I did what their needs were.”<sup>13</sup> Expanding on why this idea can be difficult to grasp, Alexandria Jones claims, “It doesn’t make sense to us that we can’t put ... a large amount of money into something or a whole lot of energy ... and it’s not just going to change.”<sup>14</sup> Freirian apprenticeship proposes that this realization occurs by seeing through personal relationships, as Sandman did, that the oppressed are actually better situated to lead the change than those who benefit from the oppression.

Apprenticeship implies both human relationship and participatory education, and a Freirian apprenticeship in this context must involve both actual relationships with farmworkers and active participation in their struggles. Freire notes, “The real Easter is not commemorative rhetoric. It is praxis; it is historical involvement,”<sup>15</sup> and insists correspondingly that “this journey cannot be made ‘within’ their consciousness. It must be made in history.”<sup>16</sup> Not coincidentally, stories of human interactions prove central to the transformation that people describe having experienced through NFWM. Accounts of close personal relationships and even brief encounters with farmworker organizers like Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Baldemar Velasquez and also workers in general play a prominent role throughout these interviews as primary sources for the interviewees’ education. Jones tells how “developing friendships with people who are living dual lives”<sup>17</sup> taught her about larger trade and economic systems in a way that books or lectures could never have. Suzanne Darweesh claims that everybody should visit the fields and meet farmworkers themselves,<sup>18</sup> recognizing that relationships provide the strongest foundation for further action. Many interviewees detail what they have learned through serving as drivers or observers at workers’ meetings and participating in rallies and marches related to union campaigns. Other forms of action they mention include organizing events where farmworkers and non-farmworkers meet and build relationships, holding fundraisers for farmworker organizations, writing legislators and corporate leaders, and speaking out in public and in religious communities about farmworker justice. Whether or not these participants have read Freire and understand what they are doing as *praxis*, these practices of solidarity are the

---

<sup>11</sup> Sandman, 4-5. Sandman is a former Illinois Migrant Ministry staff person and longtime board member of NFWM from Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>12</sup> Dave Austin, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 4. Austin is a public health professional and leader of the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship’s Farmworker Support Action Team in Durham, North Carolina.

<sup>13</sup> Sandman, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Alexandria Jones, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 6. Jones is a former NFWM state organizer for North Carolina from Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>15</sup> Freire, 170.

<sup>16</sup> Freire, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, 8. Jones is specifically talking about workers who spend part of the year in Mexico and part of the year in the U.S. through the federal H-2A “guest worker” program which provides temporary agricultural visas to some migrant farmworkers.

<sup>18</sup> Suzanne Darweesh, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 4. Suzanne Darweesh is a former staff person of the California Migrant Ministry and a longtime board member of NFWM from Los Angeles, California.

“historical involvement”<sup>19</sup> Freire describes which ensure that the transformation occurs not merely “‘within’ their consciousness.”<sup>20</sup>

Taken together, the interviews provide testimony that many involved with NFWM do experience something similar to “their own Easter” through their participation in the farmworker movement. While almost all of the interviewees express an increased awareness of how their economy and society actually work, many also attest to more personal transformations, as well. They describe themselves and others being “moved”<sup>21</sup> and “marked”<sup>22</sup> and detail how they have been transformed. Ed Brandt says he has become “a more nonviolent person... more focused on peace and justice,”<sup>23</sup> while Lucy Boutte talks about simply becoming “more human.”<sup>24</sup> Bert Perry explains that she learned conflict mediation skills and diplomacy and raised her kids differently because of NFWM,<sup>25</sup> and Trickey discusses the desire he feels to give his “identity to the workers.”<sup>26</sup> The experiences can be empowering, enabling people to overcome fears and stand up for what they believe. Darweesh confesses, “I was very reticent to speak up for several years. Gradually that’s changed. I’m not such a scaredy-cat anymore. I’m more vocal.”<sup>27</sup> Sandman describes having initially been shy about her public activism, “hoping that none of [her] neighbors would pass by,”<sup>28</sup> but eventually becoming bolder and even confronting the police when she sees them acting unjustly.<sup>29</sup> Often involvement in particular campaigns can transform an individual’s faith in what is possible. After claiming that even the strongest supporters at times felt that their efforts were “futile”<sup>30</sup> and their faith was “shaky sometimes,”<sup>31</sup> Austin counters that “on that day in 2004 when the Mt. Olive Pickle boycott was won, that helped!”<sup>32</sup>

While the interviews include accounts of a wide variety of transformations, the most consistent type which interviewees describe experiencing and trying to inspire in others relates to how they understand their faiths. More specifically, this most often means some shift or development in a person’s understanding of the social implications of Christianity. Although many reference Christian scriptures or church and community teaching to justify their support of farmworker organizing, they also relate receiving significant resistance from their communities. For Darweesh, it’s a rather simple matter; Jesus instructed his followers to care for the poor, yet people resist following that instruction.<sup>33</sup> Jones suggests that the problem may occur when Christian education is too removed from human experience. She claims, “I think in the church a

---

<sup>19</sup> Freire, 170.

<sup>20</sup> Freire, 175.

<sup>21</sup> Dominique Aulizio, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 2. Aulizio is a recent graduate of the University of Central Florida in Orlando and early member of the Youth and Young Adult (YAYA) movement network within NFWM.

<sup>22</sup> Lucy Boutte, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 5, 10-11. Boutte is a Catholic lay leader and California organizer for NFWM from Los Angeles, California.

<sup>23</sup> Ed Brandt, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 2. Brandt is a Lutheran minister and chairperson of the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry in Portland, Oregon.

<sup>24</sup> Boutte, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Bert Perry, *NFWM 2011 Documentary Project*, 9. Perry is a longtime NFWM organizer from Deland, Florida.

<sup>26</sup> Trickey, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Darweesh, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Sandman, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Sandman, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Austin, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Austin, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Austin, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Darweesh, 4.

lot of times ... we start to learn about justice through parables... but justice as it's lived out is very different. It's harder. It's messier."<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, Trickey says that he is involved with NFWM exactly because he takes Sunday school and the creeds he says each week "too seriously."<sup>35</sup> He maintains optimism for others, stating, "For the people who do not yet understand the social justice issues of Christianity ... there is always time to learn."<sup>36</sup> In any case, the core of NFWM's ministry involves challenging people to consider and articulate what they believe and what that means about how they live within unjust social systems, especially when that contrasts with the conclusions of others in their communities.

The resistance many experience means that personal involvement with the farmworker movement does not come without risk. Indeed, Freire speaks of "the harder trials that lie ahead"<sup>37</sup> for those who find the courage to enter into apprenticeship. Genuine elimination of oppression would destabilize the social order, endangering the livelihood and security of those who directly benefit from the status quo. He explains that the "shrewd" will respond violently to such change and, while the violence will first remain focused against the oppressed classes and not those acting in solidarity with them, "at other times, however, their violence will be indiscriminate."<sup>38</sup> He sums up the situation of the Christian discovering a *prophetic* faith in saying, "There is no prophecy without risk."<sup>39</sup>

While it is not everyone's experience with NFWM, enough stories emerge from the interviews to reveal that this form of practicing one's faith can involve substantial risks. Trickey tells a story about being attacked publicly in a newspaper article and feeling his reputation and job threatened for his advocacy on behalf of farmworkers.<sup>40</sup> Darweesh, a Presbyterian minister, recounts the pain of being rejected by her own congregation for the work she was doing with farmworkers.<sup>41</sup> Many of the most profound moments of these interviews involve people reflecting on what they learned through these types of experiences. After explaining how her husband lost his job and career as the manager of anti-union Winn Dixie because of her public involvement with farmworker unions,<sup>42</sup> Perry comments, "It did teach me something. The UCC's statement of faith says there is a cost and a joy to discipleship, and there was a big cost."<sup>43</sup> Brandt reflects on being arrested for trespassing because of his expression of support through presence with workers trying to organize. Summing up his experience of a three year legal battle, he explains,

I learned that farmworker justice does, each step, takes effort. It takes patience, it takes time, and it takes a lot of strength to keep going. And we gain that strength from the power of God, who says that God is on the side of the oppressed and powerless, and we gain strength through seeing how enduring and patient and diligent the workers themselves are, as they keep coming back.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Jones, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Trickey, 7; 9.

<sup>36</sup> Trickey, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Freire, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Freire, 175.

<sup>39</sup> Freire, 184.

<sup>40</sup> Trickey, 9-10.

<sup>41</sup> Darweesh, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Perry, 4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Perry, 4-5. UCC stands for the United Church of Christ.

<sup>44</sup> Brandt, 3.

In a cultural context in which the costs of Christian discipleship are often understood only in the abstract, many who become committed to the farmworker movement through NFWM discover more concrete costs to the practice of their faiths and thus come to know and rely on God differently through those experiences. In this context, such discovery occurs through apprenticing oneself to people who are pressed to rely on God through experiences of oppression.

### **Developing Opportunities for Freirian Apprenticeship**

The first and likely most important conclusion that can be drawn from considering these firsthand accounts of peoples' experiences with NFWM is simply that liberative education which looks quite similar to Freirian apprenticeship can and does happen in the U.S. today. Through NFWM, non-farmworkers are forming relationships with farmworkers who are organizing and experiencing "their own Easter" through their willingness to act in solidarity with those workers. The concrete reality of NFWM's model of ministry also offers insights into what Freirian apprenticeship involves. I offer three observations about NFWM that may be helpful for religious educators seeking to promote similar forms of liberative education in the U.S. today and a few concluding reflections.

First, NFWM moves past the abstract category of *the oppressed* which Freire uses in his writing to a particular oppressed social group whose oppression has clear connections to the apprentice population; their ministry would be impossible without that degree of specificity and focus. Second, NFWM creates opportunities for apprentices to build personal relationships with members of that group who are already actively engaged in some struggle to change the oppressive system; their ministry would take a significantly different, likely less reciprocal and more charity-based form without the leadership of farmworkers involved in organizing. Third, NFWM promotes a variety of opportunities for action with varying levels of risk. People with different backgrounds in different stages of their apprenticeships will be inclined to take different levels of risk, and it is important to be able to engage people at any stage in their process with opportunities to act in order to ensure that transformation occurs within history and not just within a person's consciousness.

As a whole, the historical example of NFWM suggests that educators could not easily develop opportunities for Freirian apprenticeship without being apprentices themselves. Participants in the ministry of NFWM can invite others into their relationships and corresponding activism in a way that someone not connected with farmworkers or the farmworker justice movement could not. With this in mind, perhaps the best way to understand Freirian apprenticeship or promote this form of education would not just be reading Freire or an essay about NFWM but also actually building relationships with workers and joining the movement for farmworker justice.