

## **HONORING THE WORK OF** **HOWARD MATSON AND ROSEMARY MATSON** **UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MIGRANT MINISTRY**

The Reverend Howard G. Matson (1907-1993) upon completing fifty years of parish ministry, dedicated more than a decade (1966-1977) of volunteer support to the farm worker movement. He was a founding member and Board Member of the National Farm Worker Ministry, an inter-faith group of major denominations; as well as creating the Unitarian Universalist Migrant Ministry, organizing church support of boycotting and picketing; raising funds for UFW; using the platform and pulpit to promote the farm worker cause; was a clergy presence on picket lines in cities and in the fields; lobbied in Sacramento and other State Legislatures; debated growers, was arrested testing an Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) ruling; turned his summer home over to Cesar and UFW leaders during the lettuce strike; and more.

Rosemary's support for the farm worker movement began with Howard's. (See pages 8-9 for her personal reflections.)

**The following reflections are taken from Howard's journal,**  
**A Walk to the Village, published in 1988 by Nybro Press**



**Rev. Howard Matson ((UU Migrant Ministry), left center, greets Cesar Chavez (UFW Leader), right center, as 500 farm workers arrive at Stanislaus County Unitarian Fellowship on their march to the Gallo Winery.**

**PHOTO CREDIT: Craig Currier, Modesto, CA**

*Brochure compilation and graphic design by Bob and Liz Fisher, July 2010. Photos – courtesy Rosemary Matson private collection. Photos p.6 – from El Teatro Campesino*



**UU Migrant Ministry Booth at UUA General Assembly in New York in 1974  
-- Bob Brown of Las Vegas, Nevada, tending booth.**

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The United Farm Workers were marching from Delano to Sacramento (the state capitol) to dramatize their plight. The Virgin of Guadalupe was up front followed by farm workers carrying colorful red flags. We joined the ranks. It was very hot. When we reached Lodi early evening I fell exhausted on the grass of the public park. Suddenly Cesar Chavez appeared.

"Campesinos," he said. "We have just signed a collective bargaining agreement with Schenley!"

A great cheer went up. We had been lucky enough to be present at the real beginning of the United Farm Worker Union.

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A year before I retired from my San Francisco church I was in my summer home in Carmel Valley. A lettuce strike was going on in the Salinas Valley. Chavez was residing at a nearby mission but was being harassed. My friend wondered whether I knew of a place where Chavez might reside incognito. My wife and I looked at each other.

"Why not our house?" I asked. "After all, we do have our permanent home in San Francisco."

The offer was accepted. Chavez loved the place. We had trouble with only one neighbor who phoned to San Francisco inquiring whether we knew Chicanos were living in our house. We said they were friends of ours. He didn't realize Chavez himself was staying there.

*In 1974 and 1986 the Unitarian Universalist Association passed General Resolutions in support of the UFW boycotts. Please see page 10 for full text of resolutions.*



**Dolores Huerta, co-founder and 1st Vice President, UFW -- in debate at UUA General Assembly 1974 in New York City with George Frank, Vice President in charge of eastern relations for Gallo Winery**

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For the last seven years I have been Minister for Migrant Farm Workers for the Unitarian Universalist Association. I was in the hurly burly of things including those dangerous confrontations between Teamsters and the United Farm Workers. The clergy were present to help cool the violence. It was difficult to cool ourselves in the 120 degree heat of the Coachella Valley.

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There were two calls this morning. Chris Hartmire of the National Farm Worker Ministry canceled the meeting coming up in Chicago because of the killing of Rufino Contreras-Mijangoes on the picket line in Imperial Valley. Rufino's father and brother were on the picket line with him when the event happened. His mother is in Mexico and yet to be reached. The second call came from Sue Miner. The funeral is set for 7 A.M. tomorrow with a farm worker procession following. This evening a rosary will be said for the dead striker. Three men have been booked for investigation of murder. I cannot help but think of the murder of Juan de la Cruz in Kern County in 1973, and the killing of the Arab worker, Naji Daifullah, a few days earlier.

In the years I was minister for migrant farm workers it was clear to me the mere presence of a caring person in a crisis situation is the most important contribution one could make. Migrants are so alone as they wander from field to field in search of work. Even when families are together it is a lonely life. To live in a labor camp and to work fields close to where people live in real houses is a depressing experience.



**General Assembly 1974 NYC Dolores Huerta (at microphone) and Howard Matson**

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Cesar Chavez remarks at the memorial service for Rufino Contreras who was murdered near El Centro, California on February 10th began —

"It was a day without hope. It was a day without joy. The sun didn't sing. The rain didn't fall. Why was this such a day of evil? Because on this day greed and injustice struck down our brother Rufino Contreras.

"What is the worth of a man? What is the worth of a farm worker? Rufino, his father and brother together gave the company twenty years of their labor. They were faithful workers who helped build up the wealth of their boss, helped build up the wealth of his ranch.

"What was their reward for their service and the sacrifice? When they petitioned for a more just share of what they themselves produce, when they spoke out against injustice they endured, the company answered them with bullets; the company sent hired guns to quiet Rufino Contreras."

Near the end of his eulogy Cesar added — "If Rufino were alive today, what would he tell us? He would tell us don't be afraid. Don't be discouraged. He would tell us don't cry for me, organize!"

This is the fourth person serving the United Farm Workers who has been killed during a strike. Nan Freeman, a young Jewish girl from Massachusetts, was crushed to death by a grower's truck on a picket line at a sugar cane company in Florida. In the summer of 1973 a young Arab immigrant from Yemen, Nagi Daifallah, and an older union member, Juan de la Cruz, were killed in separate incidents a few days apart. This occurred in Kern County in California during grape strikes. I was present when many strikers and some clergy were injured.

I have strong feelings about the right of workers to organize. I am persuaded the weakening of the trade union movement would bring unparalleled exploitation to workers.



Bill Gagnon in exclusive interview at 1976 UUA G.A. with Cesar Chavez

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In the early days of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act there was considerable confusion among sheriffs whether to follow the rulings of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board that union organizers have access to ranch fields to talk to workers about their rights. Some sheriffs enforced the rulings of the Board while others arrested such organizers for trespass. It was important the law be tested. (Later the courts ruled in favor of the Board.) Three clergy volunteered to stand with those arrested; a Catholic nun, a United Church of Christ clergyman. I was the third. We went to one of the ranches in California where organizers were denied access and were arrested for trespass. We were taken to the county jail some fifteen miles away.

As clergy we were offered release without bail. We refused. Many hours passed while police tried to persuade us to accept this arrangement. We kept refusing. Finally, the assistant sheriff of the county arrived and continued the conversation.

The outcome of all this was that we were given unconditional release. The next day union organizers were allowed on the ranch. It was the first ranch to hold an election under the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act and the first ranch to establish a contract with the United Farm Workers certified by the Agricultural Labor Relations Board.

***It is not often ministerial action has such direct result.***

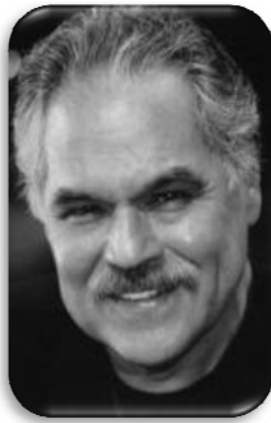
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One Sunday we were at a restaurant in San Juan Bautista, next door to the Mission, a few blocks away is the home of the Teatro Campesino (the farm workers theatre). The Teatro (under its director Luis Valdez) has converted an old warehouse into a practice theatre and offices. San Benito County where San Juan Bautista is located has a larger Mexican-American population than Anglo, It is a good base for the Teatro whose productions combine Chicano humor and tragedy.

The Teatro Campesino got its start in the early farm worker strikes under Cesar Chavez. After a day's picketing or marching the Teatro put together an impromptu outdoor performance for the strikers. It was mostly satire about the day's events and proved a terrific morale booster for the strikers. I remember one production called "Mexican for Sale" which is one of the funniest skits I have seen. The Teatro is testimony to the importance of Chicano theatre in a state with a booming Chicano population.



**"El Pachuco"**



**Luis Valdez**  
Founding Artistic Director



**Scene from a performance**

<http://www.elteatrocampesino.com/>

From El Teatro Campesino Website:

From the migrant labor fields to Broadway, Luis Valdez remains true to his original vision... performance that addresses the Chicano experience in America in a context meaningful to all Americans.

Valdez's credits include: founder & artistic director of the internationally renowned El Teatro Campesino, council member of the National Endowment of the Arts, and founding member of the California Arts Council.

His awards include, Presidential Medal of the Arts, the prestigious Aguila Azteca Award, Governors Award of the California Arts Council. Best known works: Zoot Suit, La Bamba, and Corridos, winner of the George Peabody Award.

He continues to work and mentor a new generation of theatre artists at El Teatro Campesino Playhouse in San Juan Bautista, California.

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I recall a rally held in the public park in Coachella, California, in 1973. It was a time of confrontation with the Teamsters. It had been an ugly day on the picket line. People had been beaten up, cars fired upon, organizers knocked unconscious. One young man had his neck cut by an ice pick. It looked as though the next day would be worse.

At the rally in the public park a weary group of strikers assembled. Half of them were women as half the workers are women. The tension of the day could be palpably felt. The unasked question was what would happen the next day? Speaker after speaker recounted the terrible events that had just happened and explained the issues of the strike.

It was Chavez who closed the meeting. He looked clean and rested as though he had spent a leisurely day at home instead of a grueling one in the fields at 110-degree heat, subject to personal abuse and physical danger. At the end of his talk he asked a question.

"Will you return to your picket lines tomorrow?"

"Yes!" everyone shouted.

Cesar continued.

"And you are not afraid?"

"No!" everyone cried.

"Not even a little?"

The tension broke. Everyone laughed. Of course they were afraid. Who would not be? When morning came they were all at their stations including Cesar Chavez.

There will be no humor in the Imperial Valley this morning. Nor will the killing of Rufino stop this movement for social justice. The time has come for unionization of migrant farm workers. The time has really come.



**Rev. Howard Matson conferring and strategizing with United Farm Workers president Cesar Chavez**

## In Rosemary Matson's Own Words



Cesar Chavez (center) planning with Howard Matson and Rosemary Matson

My own support of the farm worker movement began with Howard's. In the early sixties, Howard was serving as Associate Minister in the San Francisco Unitarian Church and I was on the staff of the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley.

With our different skills and abilities, Howard and I worked well as a team. We walked hand-in-hand making our Unitarian Universalist Migrant Ministry a productive activity. While Howard was publicly "out front," speaking, debating, meeting, lobbying, using his clergy presence in ways to gain support for the farm workers — I, with my organizational and administrative skills, created informational materials, newsletters, flyers, announcements and mailings, whatever was needed. Howard said his last ministry, Minister to Migrant Farm Workers, was his most satisfying. Before he died on August 17, 1993, I promised him I would carry on our support of the farm worker movement. That I have.

There are many defining moments that are etched in my memory. I would share some of them with you.

***I remember...***being moved by Chris Hartmire's passionate talk to a group in Marin County about the farm worker movement and arranging a brief encounter with him at the San Francisco Airport to let him know that Howard and I wanted to become involved with this movement in a substantial way. He invited Howard to join the ecumenical National Farm Worker Ministry.

***I remember...***my unexpectedly providing lunch for Cesar and fifteen of his delegation at our home in Berkeley. They were between meetings in Oakland. A trip to the deli for pans of lasagna sufficed for all except Cesar whom I found out was a vegetarian, drank carrot juice, and needed a nap.



***I remember...***responding when we heard that Cesar and his leadership needed safe housing not too far from the Salinas headquarters of UFW during the lettuce strike. We turned our summer home in Carmel Valley over to them. It was a time when Chicanos were not welcome in Carmel Valley Village except as menial laborers. The only problem we experienced during the nine months we housed the UFW leaders was with our nearest neighbor, a prominent grower. He phoned us in San Francisco to object to our house being used by Chicanos. He did not know that Cesar was there. I happened to answer the phone. When Howard heard who was calling, he got on the other phone to listen. It was a strenuous conversation which lasted almost an hour. Our neighbor became quite threatening. "The good people of Carmel Valley will not let you get away with this." Uncertain what to do, I called Leroy Chatfield. Leroy talked to Cesar and reported back to us that Cesar said as long as we didn't particularly want to be friends with our neighbor, he wanted to stay on. He liked the place, and lived with his life being threatened most of the time anyway. We held our ground.

***I remember...***our first visit to Delano and LaPaz inadvertently coinciding with Helen's birthday. Cesar asked us to have lunch with them. We felt honored. It was moving to see their unpretentious and simple lifestyle.

***I remember...***our staying overnight with Leroy and Bonnie Chatfield in Delano. Leroy took us to a large UFW meeting that evening, introducing us as friends who had turned our house over to Cesar when he needed a place during the lettuce strike. We were overwhelmed with the gratitude union members expressed to us for "taking care of Cesar."

***I remember...***being in Phoenix, Arizona at the time Cesar ended his long fast. We were staying with the Reverend Ray Manker and his wife Gretchen. Ray had been one of the clergy working with Howard in his Migrant Ministry. We were in awe of the very large numbers of public figures who had come to Phoenix to be with the farm workers in witnessing this sacred act and praying for Cesar's life.

***I remember...***in April 1993, at the time of Cesar's death and memorial service, the thoughtfulness of Leroy Chatfield and Chris Hartmire. Howard was by then ailing and in the last months of his life, too fragile to travel to Delano for the service. Both Leroy and Chris sent Howard detailed accounts of the service so that he could feel that he had been there. One of Howard's last acts was to write a letter to the editor of our local paper expressing his sadness at Cesar's death at 66 when there was so much left to do. Howard wrote in part "It was my privilege to have known and worked with this servant of the people for almost two decades. I admired and respected the man and his mission. He sought justice for the lowest paid workers in our nation. That the very people who work to put food on our tables would themselves live in poverty is a gross injustice. That today their wages are higher, their working conditions improved, their dignity restored, is a tribute to Chavez. Alas, the task is far from complete and he is gone. Who will lead La Causa now?"

***The work goes on.***



## Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

### Support of UFW Boycott - 1974 General Resolution

WHEREAS, the 1972 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association adopted a resolution asking member churches, fellowships, and constituencies to refrain from purchasing, serving, and eating iceberg (head) lettuce unless it is clearly marked with the Black Eagle label of the United Farm Workers' Union; and

WHEREAS, table grape growers and many wineries are now without contracts with the United Farm Workers' Union for their migrant and seasonal field hands;

BE IT RESOLVED: That the 1974 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the United States and Canada urges member societies and members of societies to refrain from purchasing, serving, and eating table grapes as well as iceberg (head) lettuce, unless these products are clearly marked with the Black Eagle label of the United Farm Workers' Union; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That member societies and members of societies purchase only those continental wines certified by the UU Migrant Minister; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That the 1974 General Assembly urges a free secret plebiscite of the Gallo workers, both employed and unemployed, and that the Gallo wineries, the Teamsters, and the United Farm Workers accept impartial arbitration; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That the 1974 General Assembly calls upon the Congress to pass the legislation providing that migrant and other farm workers are assured of the right to organize collectively and the right to select representatives by secret ballot, on the same basis as other workers.

### Support of Grape Boycott - 1986 General Resolution

WHEREAS, the real and potential worth, dignity, and health of farm workers is currently threatened by practices in agricultural communities which threaten the entire eco-system; and

WHEREAS, it has been documented by the National Farm Worker Ministry and others that grape growers are now using deadly pesticides that poison farm workers, and cause cancer and birth defects in infants; and

WHEREAS, it is reported that over 300,000 farm workers are poisoned each year by pesticides (World Resources Institute); and

WHEREAS, the United Farm Workers of America have developed a "Wrath of Grapes" campaign to alert consumers about pesticides which are used on grapes, about the pesticide residue which remains on the grapes which consumers buy, and about the ways in which these pesticides harm farm workers; and

WHEREAS, the "Wrath of Grapes" boycott of fresh table grapes has been endorsed by the national Farm Worker Ministry, and experienced interfaith organization with 66 years of service with and to farm workers and now providing ministry to pesticide victims;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED: That the Unitarian Universalist Association endorses and supports the boycott of fresh table grapes and urges its member societies and individual Unitarian Universalists to observe the boycott, educate themselves and speak publicly about the pesticide dangers, and consider donations to the National Farm Worker Ministry, 111-A Fairmont Avenue, Oakland, CA 94611, for their advocacy of farm worker justice and service to pesticide victims; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That the General Assembly Planning Committee and other continental gathering committees be urged to convey to conference site personnel that Unitarian Universalists wish to observe the existing fresh table grape boycott.