

Honoring an American Hero

by M. Linda Jaramillo
Executive Minister

March 31 marked the birthday of Cesar Estrada Chavez. He would have been 88 years old this year had he not passed away at the relatively young age of 66. In response to inhumane treatment of farmworkers, Cesar Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association in 1962. Chavez and Dolores Huerta later formed the United Farm Workers, which continues to challenge ongoing practices in places where farmworkers are still expected to work very long hours in harsh conditions for very low pay. His commitment is remembered today among organizations that have joined together in an advocacy campaign for just wages.

Even in his daily encounters with many forms of injustice, Cesar Chavez responded gallantly. Following in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi and Mahatma Gandhi, he practiced nonviolent methods of social resistance. Justice was at his very core and he lived what he professed, “The love for justice that is in us, is not only the best part of our being, but it is also the most true to our nature.”

As the powerful workers’ rights movement grew in the 1960s and 1970s, Chavez encouraged thousands of Latino farmworkers to join Filipino Americans in the now famous grape boycott. This bold, nonviolent action incorporated strikes, marches, and fasting to bring attention to poor working conditions in the vineyards of California. Their long-term efforts were rewarded in 1970 when grape growers signed the first ever union contracts with the workers.

It was in the midst of this that Chavez appealed to church leaders for help. In response, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, being held in St. Louis, Mo., in 1973, took an amazing unprecedented action. They chartered an airplane filled with almost one hundred delegates bound for Coachella, California, who then walked arm in arm in solidarity with the farmworkers.

Cesar Chavez took leadership personally. He engaged in several food fasts to attract attention to the movement, and that he did! He completed his first 36-day “Fast for Life” on Aug. 21, 1988.

Moved by this action, Jessie Jackson stepped in to continue the fast. Actors, religious leaders, singers, and politicians followed suit and continued the Chavez fast in his name. Today, the Fast 4 Families honors the practice Chavez modeled as they seek just immigration reform. Fast 4 Families began their nonviolent witness in Washington DC last fall and are now aboard buses crossing the country visiting key Congressional home offices and lifting their voices for change.

During his last days, Chavez was working with United Farmworker attorneys who were defending a lawsuit brought by a huge California lettuce producer, Bruce Church, Inc. Church brought a case against the UFW asking for millions of dollars in damages as a result of the lettuce boycott of the 1980s. Even though the boycott occurred in California, Church chose to bring the suit to Arizona where agri-businesses dominated the landscape. Corporate greed – on the backs of workers – is as alive today as it was then.

Chavez passed away unexpectedly on April 23, 1993, near the Arizona community of his birth. More than 50,000 mourners attended his funeral where Cardinal Robert Mahoney called Chavez “a special prophet for the world’s farmworkers.” He was indeed a prophet and a legendary American Hero who worked every day of his life for justice.



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