

Of Blessings and Boycotts

by Derek Duncan

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When you give thanks for the hands that prepared your meal, remember not just those in the kitchen but everyone who helped plant, pick and package the food along the way. The more we learn about our globalized economy, the more we understand our consumer choices as ethical choices, and how our responsible purchases can support the many people who helped grow or produce the food, clothing and other goods we buy.

Our power as consumers is the driving force behind the concept of boycotting. For example, when we care about the people who produce our food, we can demonstrate that by supporting businesses that care like we do. We can encourage other businesses to also care by not supporting—or boycotting—they when they don't treat their workers fairly or pay them a living wage.

The United Church of Christ has long supported a group of Florida farm workers who pick the tomatoes purchased by many of the nation's largest fast-food companies. In 2001 the UCC endorsed the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' boycott of Taco Bell, called in an effort to get that chain to support better pay and working conditions for tomato pickers. Taco Bell eventually agreed to a penny-per-pound pay increase for tomatoes that nearly doubled workers' pay and now, after fifteen years of pressure, many of the fast food industry's largest corporations, including McDonalds, Burger King and YUM! Brands have joined the Fair Food Program, agreeing to only buy tomatoes from growers that uphold a code of conduct that respects workers' rights, raises pay, and protects farmworkers from the worst forms of exploitation, including sexual harassment and slavery.

One major fast food chain, Wendy's, still refuses to join the Fair Food program. So in March the Coalition of Immokalee Workers called a national boycott of the chain until the firm joins the Program. The UCC Board recently endorsed the boycott. UCC members will participate in a rally outside Wendy's during its annual shareholder meeting on May 26 and in the Wendy's Boycott National Day of Prayer on Monday, May 23.

Over the years the UCC has joined in a number of boycotts, from Mt. Olive Pickles on behalf of North Carolina farm workers, to Nestlé products because of the company’s international efforts to market their infant formula over breastfeeding. In 1985 the UCC joined many other groups in the global campaign to boycott and divest from corporations doing business in South Africa, an action that was controversial at the time but is now credited with helping bring an end to the apartheid system in South Africa.

In 2015 the UCC passed two resolutions at its General Synod that upheld the use of a boycott as an act of faith and non-violent public witness. The Synod passed a resolution calling for a boycott of all Washington Redskins football games and merchandise until the team changes its racist name and logo. Another resolution, aimed at supporting non-violent efforts to end Israel’s occupation, called on the church “to boycott goods identified as produced in or using the facilities of illegal settlements located in the occupied Palestinian territories” and to divest from companies “profiting from, or complicit in, human rights violations arising from the occupation.”

Some people don’t agree that faith groups should endorse and participate in consumer boycotts, but the power of our public witness and collective economic choices is undeniable and effective. If you care for the hands that picked or produced the things you consume, do give thanks. But then purchase prayerfully and responsibly as well.

Learn more:

- Background on UCC Wendy’s Boycott: www.ucc.org/boycott_wendys
- Wendy’s Boycott National Day of Prayer: <http://bit.ly/1R6q5UV>

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