



**Migration and
Refugee Services**
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UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Christ in the Heart of the Migrant Farmworker Today

Delegation Trip to Yakima, Washington

OCTOBER 2023

TRIP DELEGATION

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

- Cultural Diversity in the Church
- Evangelization and Catechesis
- Justice, Peace, and Human Development
- Migration and Refugee Services

Archdiocese Chicago/Pastoral Migratoria

Archdiocese of Seattle

Diocese of Baker

Diocese of Spokane

Diocese of Victoria

Diocese of Yakima

Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network

United States Conference of Catholic
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Credit: Joseph Sorrentino/Getty

Introduction

After a multi-year pause on visitations due to the pandemic, the USCCB's office of [Pastoral Care of Migrants, Refugees, and Travelers](#) (PCMRT) renewed its migrant worker-focused delegation visits on August 27-30, 2023 to the Diocese of Yakima. In its daily work, PCMRT develops catechetical, liturgical and evangelization materials for use with farmworkers, the promotion of regional, diocesan and local gatherings of persons involved in ministry with farmworkers, and assistance to the USCCB [Migration and Refugee Services' Policy Office](#) on the development of statements and positions regarding legislation affecting farmworkers. To this end, these annual delegation trips provide an opportunity to meet and pray with our brothers and sisters in farm work and the ministry leaders who accompany them, and to provide clarity about the cultural, economic, and spiritual challenges that migrant workers confront while living and working in the United States.

Bishop Joseph Tyson of the Yakima Diocese welcomed participants of the 2023 delegation, which had as its theme, "Christ in the Heart of the Migrant Farmworker Today". National leaders who participated in the PCMRT trip held to the commitment that they are a part of "a Church that goes forth" to encounter migrants. Such a commitment brings to mind

the words of Bishop Tyson, that “the church does not have a mission; the mission has a church.”

The work of the Church with migrant farmworkers also reflects the thinking of Pope Francis, who in his most recent [World Day of Migrants and Refugees message](#) reminds us that “the decision to migrate should always be free, yet in many cases, even in our day, it is not. Conflicts, natural disasters, or more simply the impossibility of living a dignified and prosperous life in one’s native land is forcing millions of persons to leave.” This is too often the case for many migrant farmworkers who are in their search of a better future, for themselves and their family. A particular challenge shared by many migrant farmworkers is the prolonged period of separation from their families, which is often due to the inability of migrant workers to provide effectively for their families if they remain in their home country.

The delegation included members of the USCCB’s Department of Migration and Refugee Services (MRS), Justice Peace and Human Development (JPHD), and Secretariat of Evangelization and Catechesis. Delegation members also represented Pastoral Migratoria from the Archdiocese of Chicago; Archdiocese of Seattle, represented by Auxiliary Bishops Eusebio Elizondo and Frank Shuster; the Dioceses of Spokane, Tyler, and Baker; and leadership of the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network (CMFM). Tony Cube, [Justice for Immigrants](#) (JFI) National Manager, represented MRS on the delegation.



Credit: Diocese of Yakima

Overview

On many farms, orchards, and other agricultural facilities and sites across the country, stable and consistent access to annual or seasonal employees is limited due to lack of native-born locally based employees, competition from other industries, and low wages or wage fluctuations. This decades-long problem was finally addressed in 1986 with the creation of the H-2A temporary agricultural program, which allows agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of domestic workers to bring nonimmigrant foreign workers to the U.S. to perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature.

H-2A visas are valid for 10 months or less, and the payrate must be the same for H-2A workers as U.S. workers. Additionally, the employer must provide free housing to workers and the housing provided must meet minimum federal standards. The employer must either provide three meals a day to each of the workers or furnish free and convenient cooking and kitchen for workers to prepare and cook their own meals. If the employer provides the meals, then the employer has the right to charge each worker a certain amount per day to cover associated expenses.

In Fiscal Year 2021, the U.S. Department of Labor certified that **317,000 jobs** were available through the H-2A visa program and 258,000 of the visas were issued. That year, 99% of the H-2A visas went to citizens of four countries: Mexico (93%), South Africa (3%), Jamaica (2%), and Guatemala (1%), and over half of the total H-2A jobs were in five states: California, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Washington. This year, **38,644 H-2A workers** have come to Washington, according to data from the state’s Agricultural and Seasonal Workforce Services Advisory Committee.

[The Farm Workforce Modernization Act](#) (FWMA), which was passed on a bipartisan basis by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2021, would make changes to the H-2A program to provide more flexibility for employers, while ensuring critical protections for workers, and legalize farm workers and include an eventual path to U.S. citizenship. It has been estimated that 2.4 million farmworkers could benefit from the legislation.

While speaking to the delegation, Bishop Tyson recognized the support that local Congressional leadership have voiced for the H-2A program. Additionally, the U.S. House of Representatives expressed strong bipartisan support in the 116th and 117th Congress with its passage of the FWMA, which provided meaningful reforms to the program. While the legislation did not

secure final passage in the Senate, the widespread support voiced for the legislation points to a recognition of its importance.

The delegation trip to the Diocese of Yakima sought to empower and strengthen migrant farmworker ministry and migrant ministry efforts by providing ministry resources, sharing best practices, and opportunities for new collaborations with other migrant ministry leaders in the nation. It would also provide an opportunity to engage the migrant farmworker community in Yakima through conversation, cultural exchange, and pastoral accompaniment.

The visit included site tours of fields and orchards, fruit packing facilities, and work sites, and included times of prayer and community with H-2A migrant farmworkers, as well as workshops and time for prayer and discussion of best practices with local and national leaders in migrant farmworker ministry.

“If they can’t come to Mass, we go to them.”

Given the significant concentration of Catholics who make up the farmworker population in the Yakima diocese, the provision of pastoral care is a preeminent concern for the local Church. As these migrant communities work long and hard hours, many are often unable to attend Mass regularly at a local parish. Workers have the option not to work on any day and, thus, not get paid that day. Most work every day because they need the money, some of which is sent to their family back home. Growers like workers working every day because produce will rot in the fields on days they are not working. Also, growers generally track which workers work every day and offer future H-2A employment contracts to workers who they know are willing to work daily or have shown a history of working every day.

This work/life imbalance can negatively affect opportunities for migrant farmworkers to nurture their spiritual life. Meeting migrant farmworkers where they are is thus an important aspect of the local Church’s pastoral response. Understanding the conflicting

responsibilities related to work and prayer life of the farmworkers, Bishop Tyson reiterated to the delegation a comment that he was often heard making: “If they can’t come to Mass, we go to them.”



Credit: Diocese of Yakima

Taking Mass to migrant farmworkers is undertaken intentionally as some of the migrant farmworker camps are in remote areas, dozens of miles and hours away from the nearest Catholic parish. Since employers and growers are not required to provide worship services let alone worship space, Bishop Tyson sends his migrant ministry priest to hold Mass during the week for the workers. This Mass provides an opportunity for migrant farmworkers to attend to their spiritual needs and to reconnect with the Catholic community around them.

The importance of worshipping together became apparent to the delegation on the Sunday evening arrival in Yakima, when delegation members were invited to a weekly Mass hosted by the

diocese and with H-2A agricultural workers at their employer-provided housing facility, the Fairbridge Inn, at the center of town. Mass gave delegation participants a unique opportunity to worship with seasonal migrant farmworkers, mostly men, from Mexico and Central America. Afterward, there was a opportunity to informally meet with them individually to hear stories of their families, employment as H-2A workers, their pastoral and personal needs, and the services and assistance provided by the Diocese of Yakima.

As an additional step aimed at creating a sense of community between the local church and the farmworker community, Bishop Tyson has made it mandatory for diocesan seminarians to work in the fields alongside farmworkers, most of whom speak Spanish and have limited English language skills. This assignment provides seminarians with the opportunity to personally understand what farmworkers do and experience. Fr. Jesus Mariscal, a former immigrant himself and the current director of seminarian formation, was the diocese’s first seminarian to work alongside and minister to migrant farmworkers.

At one encounter during the delegation trip, Fr. Jesus

Mariscal and Ana Contreras of the Diocese of Yakima facilitated a discussion with the migrant farmworkers being served by the diocese's active migrant ministry program. This program was made necessary because of the region's large H-2A worker presence and geographical location in the fertile Central Washington valley. A central concern voiced by the migrant workers was the long separation from their families while they were living in the United States, although this was offset somewhat by the knowledge that their earnings would provide better lives and increased opportunity for their loved ones in their home countries. There was simultaneously expressed a desire to stay in the United States, become citizens, and reunite with their families here.

Diverse Voices in the H-2A Discussion

The delegation tours of apple orchards confirmed that harvesting the produce from the fields is difficult work, starting before sunrise and continuing through the heat of the afternoon sun as it beats down on the high desert. According to H-2A workers at an apple orchard, they are paid to fill bins with apples and the more bins they fill, the more they are paid. It takes 45-90 minutes to fill a bin, and, by law, pickers are limited to working eight hours per day. H-2A workers are paid \$28.50 per bin and on a "good day" a picker can fill 4-6 bins per day.

Depending on the month of the harvest, H-2A farmworkers will pick a variety of different fruit during their H-2A contract: Cherries in late June, Fuji apples in mid-August, Gala apples in late August, and pears in September. It was reported on the tour that farmworkers in Mexico make about \$2,500 per year, while H-2A agricultural workers in the U.S. make \$25,000 person season. With that in mind, Bishop Tyson acknowledged that "it's easy to understand why they come to work here."

In coordination with the delegation visit to the apple orchard was a parallel visit to an apple packing warehouse run by a family of diocesan parishioners and contributors to the diocese's various organizations. The warehouse is unanimously considered as the largest, most modern, and state of the art fruit warehouse in the Pacific Northwest and has been operating in Yakima since 1912.

While H-2A workers made up most of the workforce even at the warehouse, unlike in the fields, many working there were women. The working conditions in the warehouse were much different from what we observed in the orchards because the warehouse was

climate controlled, had a cafeteria, and indoor restrooms. As in the fields, most of the warehouse workers were Spanish speakers primarily from Mexico and some from Central America. One concern expressed by the warehouse owner as the delegation was preparing to depart focused on his concern related to state legislation effective next year that mandates an increase in hourly wages and will raise the cost of employing H-2A workers in his facility. According to the owner, the increase will hurt his bottom line.

The pastoral visit culminated in a closing Mass celebrated by Bishops Tyson, Elizondo and Shuster at a county-run migrant camp site.

General Recommendations

Greater integration of Church resources and services to respond more proactively to the needs of migrant workers and their ministries.

1. Given the high volume of migrant farmworkers from Mexico, it is important to coordinate with the Mexican Catholic Church to provide information to local communities and orient migrant farmworkers as best as possible before their arrival in the U.S.
2. Given their extended presence in the United States, ensure that consistent lines of communication are provided to contact migrant farmworkers with their families back home.
3. Reflect more deeply as to how the Church can respond to the lack of humane conditions for farmworkers or dehumanizing practices when encountered, which can include restrictions on freedom of movement (e.g. inability to leave one's residence, or permission required to leave residence), inaccessibility to transportation for basic needs such as food and medicine, worker shift expectations, salary, etc.
4. Periodically survey dioceses that have migrant farmworkers present about the needs of farmworkers and aim to implement findings in pastoral and social outreach to these communities.

Implement migrant ministry best practices employed by St. Joseph Church in Yakima and by the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network (CMFN).

1. Consider ways to be *iglesia en salida* (Evan-gelium gaudium 24) – in the words of Pope Francis, a church that "goes forth", to bring the Gospel to and accompany the people where they are. Accompanying migrant farm-

worker communities as "*iglesia en salida*" may look somewhat different across the country, depending on local pastoral realities of farmworkers, but may include elements seen in Yakima, such as developing an active and sustained ministry of presence, creating opportunities for community and connection, offering opportunities for integral human development, and being flexible with schedules of migrant worker communities.

2. In areas where migrant farmworkers are employed, consider including experience working alongside farmworkers as a part of seminary and permanent diaconate formation and training;
3. Encourage seminarians to have Spanish language proficiency, as well as promote seminarian, permanent diaconate and ministry leader participation in intercultural competency trainings, such as the Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers training, offered by USCCB Cultural Diversity in the Church. Intercultural competency trainings, particularly for

priests serving in rural areas, many of whom are foreign born, can help strengthen pastoral outreach efforts with communities they are serving.

Policy Recommendations

1. Support legislation that includes a pathway to citizenship for longtime workers and makes improvements to the H-2A program, such as those included in the Farm Workforce Modernization Act.
2. Support regulatory improvements to the H-2A program through administrative rulemaking.
3. Support adequate funding for the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Foreign Labor Certification.

For any follow up questions or related inquiries on this report, please reach out to Tony Cube at ACube@usccb.org.



Credit: Joseph Sorrentino/Getty