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Workers journey far to harvest better life

EDITORS' NOTE: This is the first of three articles on ministry to migrant workers.

Gathered in the kitchen of their barracks at an Orleans County apple farm, the Spanish-speaking men talk of their lives as migrant farmworkers while Everett Hobart, a parishioner at St. John the Evangelist Church in Spencerport, translates.

"They want to earn enough so that they can go back and live in Mexico," Hobart explained. "They don't want to live here."

Most of the 16 men are from Mexico, but some come from as far away as Guatemala and Honduras to harvest crops in Florida, Texas, Georgia, the Carolinas and here in New York state.

They generally travel by bus, though a few own their own cars, and one or two even hitchhike.

Most can speak little English, though one man borders on fluency in his borrowed tongue.

They don't give their last names — and it's somewhat impolite to ask whether they are here legally or not — but they complain little of their lot, a lot which few U.S. citizens would be willing to endure to support their families.

On average, they say they have not seen their families anywhere from two to three years, although one worker's toddler daughter is staying with him at the camp.

They make \$13 per crate of eating apples they pick, and \$10 per crate of apples that can be used for sauce. They say they generally work from about 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and usually fill about six to eight crates per man. Unless it rains, they work every day, including weekends.

Altogether, they can make as much as three times the amount of money here in the states than they would doing similar work in their native countries.

They like working at this particular farm because they have heat, light and water in their housing facility, but especially because they don't have to pay rent, a condition of residence in some migrant camps.

When asked how they like working in New York, most of them reply: "So far, so good."

Indeed, one migrant worker pointed out that he finds the local police easier to deal with in New York. In some states, he said, he's been asked for bribes during stops for alleged traffic violations.

And, in answer to one final question, the men reply that they hardly ever see anybody from the Catholic Church, though a number of them have encountered Jehovah's Witnesses from time to time.

Catholics like Hobart, who conducts a Bible study with these men once a week, would like more migrant workers to know that the Catholic Church is willing to reach out to them.

"That's something that I really want to see," he emphasized.

So do the rest of the diocese's migrant ministry workers, along with representatives of migrant ministry from around the state who collaborated on a document given to New York's bishops this fall titled "Strangers in Our Midst: A Paper on Ministry to Migrant Farmworkers in New York State."

The document calls for a renewed church commitment to farmworkers in light of the fact that Catholic migrants have largely replaced the non-Catholic U.S. and foreign migrants who primarily made up the state's farmworker population in years past.

"In the past five years, the nature of the farmworker migration to, and within, New York has changed significantly, and in a way that presents a huge challenge to the Church," the document states. "(The) migrant flow into the state is today largely made up of people of Hispanic background from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, El Salvador and other Central and South American countries ... (A)lmost all of these workers are Catholic."

Isolated from the native population, restricted by a language barrier and bereft of the emotional comforts families might bring them, migrant workers are exactly whom Jesus was talking about when he identified with "the least of my brothers," according to Chris Wilkins, coordinator of parish and community development for the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry in Geneva.

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Two-year-old Melissa, a migrant worker's daughter from Mexico, plays in the kitchen of an Orleans County migrant camp as Everett Hobart (background) speaks with workers during a recent visit. A parishioner of St. John the Evangelist Church in Spencerport, Hobart has done migrant ministry at the camp for about three years.



Carlos, a Catholic migrant farmworker, is one of many men in the Orleans County camp who benefit from Everett Hobart's weekly Bible study group.



Part I of a series

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These are the people who have nobody. If we are to remain who we are, then we have to speak out strongly on behalf of the immigrants.

— Chris Wilkins

Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry

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STORY BY STAFF WRITER ROB CULLIVAN
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