

Steve Witte certainly does not want to sound cliché. Yet in his heart, he has a strong belief that no person is free as long as others are held in bondage.

That is why he calling for gay, lesbian, bi and trans people to help stand up for the rights of farmworkers—who, he says, have much more in common with sexual minorities than many might think.

The openly gay man brings a unique understanding of the common bond between the two groups. "Both communities are seen as disposable, not deserving of equal rights, by the larger community," he says.

Witte recently was named executive director of the Oregon Farm Worker Ministry, which links people of faith with farmworkers' struggle for justice. This is a message he thinks everyone needs to hear.

"My job is connecting with people of various religious traditions and practices, helping them to understand the plight of farmworkers in the Willamette Valley," he says. "I share the physical conditions they labor under. I want people to understand the constant exposure to toxic chemicals by both the workers and their families. I hope to educate others to understand the socioeconomic conditions that force them to leave their homes in Mexico and other countries to be willing to work in such inhumane conditions."

Witte is not the most likely person one would expect to serve as a farmworker advocate. First, he serves in a field in which most people are not accustomed to seeing gay men. Additionally, he is a white man representing a community predominantly composed of people of color.

Still, Witte insists the support he has received from colleagues has been incredible.

"I have encountered many who work in social justice areas as having a sexual minority connection either in their immediate families or extended families," he says. "Some of the mainstream religious folks might balk at my sexual orientation. I really don't allow that to interfere. Should it raise its head, well, I would remind them of Jesus' reaching out to those who were outside the mainstream of society—to use the Hebrew word for them, the *anawim*, meaning the poor and outcast."

Witte thinks the color issue doesn't present any barriers, either.

"Before I was even aware of my being gay, I was curious as to how others lived," he says. "As a child, my favorite sitter was a black teen-ager named Gloria. She taught us how to dance, to listen to Motown, to open our world beyond life in our neighborhood. To this day, Gloria and her family are [my] friends."

Witte is a Catholic priest who is on a

FIELD OF DREAMS

Gay priest helps farmworkers in their struggle for justice

by Tom Stevenson



Steve Witte's mission is to make people of faith aware of farmworker oppression

leave of absence from his diocese. Although the role is important to him, he is hesitant to talk about it because he does not want people to "pigeonhole me or think they know where I stand because of that piece of information."

"I believe God continues to reveal divine wisdom to us individually and communally," Witte says. "I believe that I am on this path for a reason, and that reason is continually being revealed to me. I am certain that working for liberation and social justice are an important part of the ministry. I see that my position with Oregon Farm Worker Ministry is both a call to minister to people on the edges of society and to be a prophetic voice to make folks aware of injustice and transgression of God's law of love."

Witte credits his Catholic high school education for inspiring him to fight injustice, not-

ing he was influenced by nuns who were arrested in civil rights actions. In addition, he says that serving as a priest in inner-city parishes helped prepare him for this job and that other experiences, including accepting his homosexuality, made him understand "the need for reform and liberation for all."

Witte thinks sexual minorities can do many things to support the farmworker cause. The most important, he says, is to become aware.

He also is promoting the farmworker unions' boycott of offending companies. "Become aware of the dangers of imported foods that are putting local growers out of business—for example, fruit from China that is being sold at local markets for less than locally grown fruit."

Witte adds the terrorist attacks on New

York and Washington, D.C., also have affected the farmworker community, along with most progressive causes.

"Certainly, Sept. 11 has reinforced the conservative right wing in America, and political forces are making it more difficult for 'out there' social causes," he says. "However, I believe it is even more crucial to work locally to fight discrimination and prejudice whether that is in the sexual minority community, people of color or farmworkers."

In this "new era" Witte sees a pressure on minorities to be quiet, to "not upset the apple cart, so to speak, for to do so is [seen as] anti-American. I see a return to the so-called comfort values of the earlier Republican administrations, i.e., the happy '50s."

Witte notes those who are passionately opposed to the farmworker movement—and many people are—simply are not recognizing the dire situation. "They absolutely are ignoring the health risks to the workers and their families," he says.

According to Witte, kids bathe in the same areas where their parents work, which results in "a greater concentration of chemicals in their blood." In addition, those children live in camps with no place to play.

Many kids end up working themselves. "In some cases, children as young as 5 are picking berries in the fields among plants covered in chemicals," Witte says.

He doesn't want people to think all growers "are evil or bad people. They are not," he maintains.

"Some are just as trapped as the farmworkers in an oppressive situation, and economically they cannot be severed from this system," Witte says. "Some of the larger growers and growers' co-ops maintain this system. Some growers cannot at this time break away from status quo for fear of losing their family farms. Until more people in the Willamette Valley rise up and make it quite clear that such injustice is not acceptable, it will continue."

Witte's hope, above all else, is that sexual minorities, who understand oppression, will be among those to raise their voices in support of farmworkers. "There are horrible, slavlike conditions at our doorsteps," he says.

And his goal is to convince others that something has to be said—and done—to alleviate those conditions. □

For more information about the OREGON FARM WORKER MINISTRY visit the Internet site home.earthlink.net/~ofwm/.

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—Steve Witte

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