

# Message to the Churches

by Rev. Baldemar Velásquez, Rapha Ministries Intl. & President of Farm Labor Organizing Committee

On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the whole world learned of the tragedy in Atlanta of the four baseball players from my alma mater, Bluffton University, who died when their bus went over the edge of an overpass causing many others to be seriously injured. I was distraught when I called my father-in-law, who lives less than ½ mile from the baseball field where these boys played. I had no other way to express my sadness and emotions to this community.

I wonder how it is that here in North Carolina, hard working men die every summer and you do not hear a word. Last week, my father-in-law said that the town of Bluffton was inundated with news crews from everywhere. All the networks, CNN, and Univision reached the entire world. They interviewed many, who expressed shock and tearful eulogies. I say to you that the tears and heartbreak are no less from the widows and children of the men who have died in the fields of North Carolina.

Let us today start bringing to light these tragedies. Let us call on the proper authorities to not only bring to light but to examine the causes, to avoid them in the future, to hold accountable those who risk men's lives for profit and gain. Let the church speak up and lend its moral authority to lift up the oppressed and call on men to examine their hearts and motives.



Have you not preached the great commission to “take the Word to every corner of the earth?” “To preach the good news to the poor, to heal the sick, cause the lame to walk and the blind to see?” Let us go to our churches where we sit every Sunday and bring the people out of the pews and into the fields less we grow spiritually obese and cannot move anywhere.

Let us go and witness where the land is dark and let our light shine there, where the country is sick, where the angels of darkness prevail and devour the lives of innocent men. Let us go and pray in these dark places and raise up continual petitions to the Lord God Almighty.

Speech delivered at the *Lenten Farmworker Remembrance and Call to Action* March 7, 2007 in Raleigh, NC

*For more information on how you or your church group can join one of our delegations to the North Carolina fields, call Leticia at (919) 731-4433*



*The white crosses represent farmworkers who have died in the fields, the black flags represent our mourning, HASTA LA VICTORIA printed on the flags represents our continuous commitment to fight for justice, the child proudly waving the flag represents the future of our movement*

Let us take what we witness to the church and lead them in how to pray, because have we not preached that “we battle not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities?” (Ephesians 6:12) Let us join the Lord in this spiritual battle because He surely has heard the cries of the harvesters. (James 5:4) “the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts.” Come to the fields to cleanse the area with prayer, come and bind up the spiritual strongholds of bondage and perverseness, and to loose the Spirit of God's freedom and adoption and obedience.

When we see the truth of why men die, let us pray for those responsible and remind them of God's command to “not mistreat or oppress the alien” (Exodus 22:21) Let us witness the conditions and reveal to the nation the causes of oppression, and speak as a nation to those who can change it. All of this too for the sake of the oppressor because he too is bound by God's Word and promises. We pray for the oppressor that he too come closer to God and that we become reconciled as children of the same Savior.

Come to the fields, come visit some of God's neglected children that the Nation has ignored and forgotten. Come and witness the mis-directed actions of our lawmakers who instead of passing laws to edify the people, pass laws to further oppress them. Come and pray with us in all these things so when you return to your home churches, you can speak and pray with eloquence, full of knowledge and truth and not with ignorance. Come all who wish to answer God's call of “who shall go?” Let us say, “I will” and amen.

**“We battle not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities”**

## **LET THEM NOT BE FORGOTTEN**

Many people are by now familiar with the tragic stories of **Raymundo Hernandez** (who had, in July 1995, exhibited signs of heat stroke or pesticide poisoning before disappearing from the tobacco fields where he had worked; several months later, his skull was found under a pecan tree), **Carmelo Fuentes** (who, in August 1998 was picking tomatoes when he suffered from heat stroke which caused severe brain damage so that even years later he is still "brain dead"), and **Urbano Ramirez** (who, in July 2001 exhibited signs of heat stroke or pesticide poisoning while working in the fields, was not treated, and his remains were found weeks later). These tragedies continue each year in the fields of North Carolina. Here are a few more recent examples.

**Juan Jose Soriano** died of heat stroke while harvesting tobacco in Wayne County on August 1, 2006. The NC Department of Labor (NCDOL) investigation found that "the employer did not furnish to each of his employees conditions of employment and a place of employment free from recognized hazards that were causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm to employees, in that employees were exposed to heat-related hazards without adequate provisions to protect them." The investigation also found that "12 migrant farmworkers were exposed to heat indices of 105-110 degrees without the opportunity to adequately hydrate or cool down" At the time of death he had 5 children, 3 under the age of 18.

**Samuel Burnett** black male died of heat stroke on Aug. 4 2006. He migrated from Ft. Pierce FL near Haynes City to North Carolina. He has family back in Jamaica.

**Rito Meza Castillo**, age 59, worked in Harnett County and died of heat stroke on July 18, 2005, just two weeks after arriving in North Carolina. At the time of death Rito Meza-Castillo had 8 children all over the age of 18. His widow lives with some of her children and is being supported by her children. For close to a year after Rito's death, Rito's widow received checks of around \$50 every week from the insurance company, which argued that this was two-thirds of Rito's weekly salary. The case was settled for \$75,000 awaiting approval from the North Carolina Industrial Commission.

**Pablo Ordaz**, age 39, was working in Person County when he died of heat stroke on/around July 22, 2005. His body was found two days after he disappeared. According to Pablo's five co-workers, he died due to the employer's negligence and failure to provide medical attention to Pablo. An investigation by the NC Department of Labor found that the grower: did not provide adequate drinking water to employees, and specifically that he discouraged and reprimanded workers for stopping and drinking water. One former co-worker has reported that he was reprimanded for drinking water shortly before Pablo's death. At the time of death, Pablo Ordaz had 2 children, both under the age of 18 and his wife was pregnant, the baby was born in October of 2005 and then died in December 2005.

**Carlitos Candelario Herrera, Jesus Navarrete and Violeta Rueda Meza:** In late 2004 and early 2005, three babies with severe birth defects were born to women employed by tomato producer AgMart. The women had worked both in North Carolina and in Florida and were illegally sprayed with pesticides by AgMart operators. Carlitos was born on December 17, 2004 without any arms or legs. Jesus was born on February 4, 2005 with an underdeveloped jaw and tongue that falls back into the throat. Violeta was born on February 6, 2005 with a missing ear and no visible sex organs. She died three days after birth.

*Please consider making a tax deductible donation to the Farm Labor Research Project—FLOC's Non-Profit sister organization. Because farmworkers are the least paid labor sector in the country, FLOC only generates 50% of its operating budget from membership dues. For the rest of our costs, we rely on the generosity of our supporters like you.*

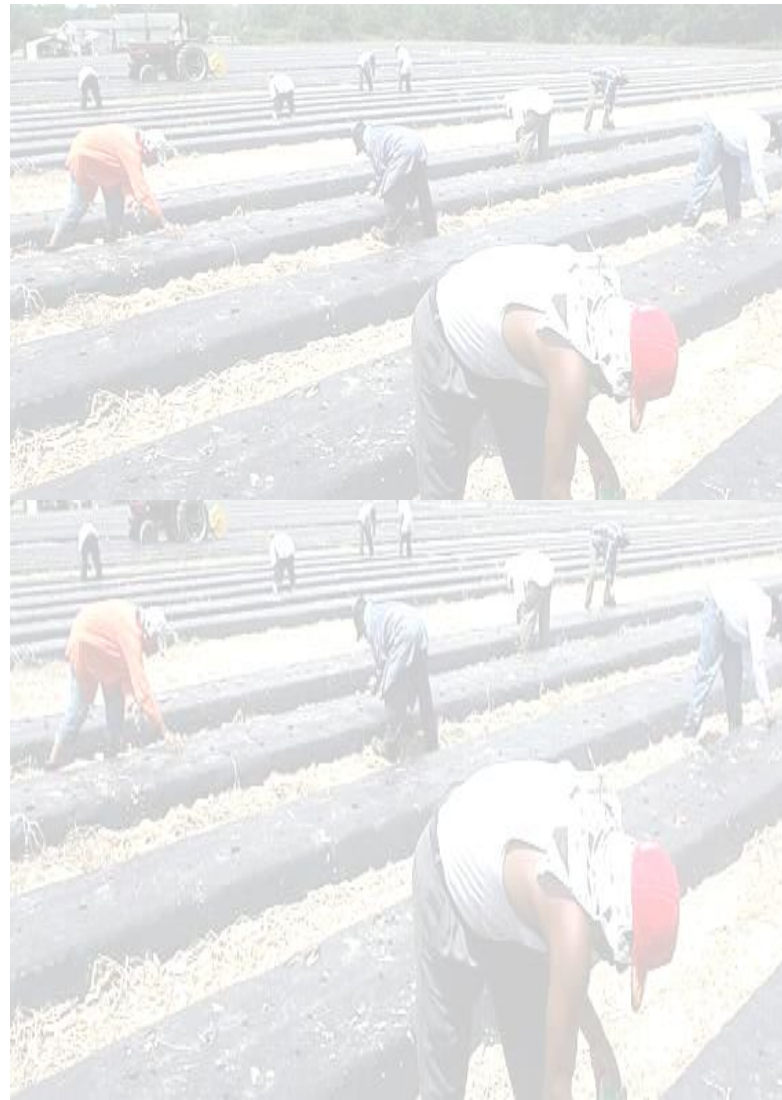
*Please also consider arranging for a FLOC representative to speak to your congregation.*

*"And the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts..."*

*-James 5:4*

## **Message to the Churches**

**Rev. Baldemar Velasquez, Rapha Ministries Intl.  
President, Farm Labor Organizing Committee**



**Farm Labor Organizing Committee**

**4354 Highway 117 South,  
Dudley, NC 28333**

**Tel: (919) 731-4433 Fax: (919) 731-4441**

**HASTA LA VICTORIA!**