

Rev. Michael Livingston
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
FLOC march and rally at Reynolds American
Sunday, October 28 2007



I am here today representing the 35 member denominations of the National Council of Churches in the USA with over 100,000 congregations and 45 million members. They are protestant and orthodox, rich and poor, urban and rural, big churches and small, white, black, brown, yellow and red, republican and democrat and while not all of them agree on much, how could they? They share the same values regarding the dignity of labor and the value of every human life. We are all immigrants deserving decent working conditions and the right to organize to represent our interests.

I am here because you are our brothers and sisters, because what happens to you matters to me and to us, because we want Susan Ivey and RJ Reynolds to know that when she will not meet with you she turns her back on all of us...And Susan, it's a shame to shatter the glass ceiling and sit in the seat of power that for so long has been denied to women and then to preside over conditions that cause the suffering of people whose only desire is to provide for their families. This is not the American way. So I want to say to you, "Talk Susan, talk to farmworkers, talk to FLOC, talk to us, and talk to Baldemar Velasquez. Come to the table and talk."

Tobacco companies had to be made to acknowledge that smoking cigarettes can cause cancer and cancer kills people. Well, we know that harvesting tobacco in oppressive heat without enough water to drink kills people and one death is too many, and any death is unnecessary. Six have died since 2005 leaving behind them 17 children. Back breaking stoop labor, worker harassment, miserable housing in labor camps, tobacco sickness, no job security...This must stop now!

The Annual General Assembly of the National Council of Churches will begin meeting November 6th. I will be telling the delegates about your struggle and encouraging them to write to Susan Ivey to tell her to meet with farmworkers to discuss and then to make the kinds of changes in working conditions that only RJ Reynolds has the power to make.

Someone asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment and he to love God and to love one's neighbor as we love ourselves. Well, we can't make RJ Reynolds love us, but we can demand that the company treat farmworkers with the respect and dignity any person created in the image of God deserves. With profits in excess of \$500 million dollars in 2006 RJ Reynolds can afford to insure safe, humane conditions and fair wages.

The NCC helped organize the National Farm Worker Ministry. We have been partners with FLOC in many humanitarian campaigns. We were with you in March of this year at the remembrance service for the nine people who have died from the deplorable conditions in the fields-- six in the last two years-- we are with you today and we will stay with you until this struggle is won.