



Under Our Noses

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As a Presbytery, we have entered the fourth of our themes under Matthew 25: Fair Employment. Based on the Scripture lesson in Matt. 25:31-46, we hear the question, “Lord, when did we see you naked and give you clothing?” Fair employment addresses many topics: disability access (particularly important on this anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act), just wages, non-discrimination, and more. By removing barriers to fair employment, people can work and sustain themselves in most cases.

We have zeroed in on one aspect of fair employment, labor trafficking. A form of modern-day slavery, people are forced into work situations that they cannot escape. In some cases, valid immigration papers are taken by the traffickers. Other times, the trafficker claims to be owed an ever-increasing debt for housing or food, with the worker being unable to repay the debt despite working grueling hours. The worker’s family might be threatened with violence if the worker tries to leave or report abuse. This trafficking happens right under our noses, but we often don’t see it.

Migrant workers are especially vulnerable. In our beautiful, productive agricultural state, we depend on migrant labor. According to a [recent story](#) in The Guardian, the increasing size and consolidation of dairy farms, for example, often requires round-the-clock milking, and in turn, a larger workforce. According to UMOS, the foreign-born population in Wisconsin has grown by 45% since 2000, with rural counties seeing largest and fastest growth of that population. Immigrant workers make up approximately 40% of the workforce on Wisconsin dairy farms, and up to 90% are undocumented.

Jeff Williams, of Williams Bedrock Bovine, the third-largest dairy farm in Green County, reflected in The Guardian story about how reliant they are on migrant workers. Since 2008 when they expanded up to 1,100 milking cows, the farm found it hard to hire anyone but Latinos. It’s been more than five years since a white person has even applied for a job there. Through his experience, he has become an advocate of sorts for increased worker rights. “How hard is it to give them some sort of legalization and work towards documentation or legal status? These guys all pay into social security and these guys will never see a dime of it,” Williams said in the Guardian interview. “At least give them a [...] driver’s license.”

On August 5, 6 pm, the Presbytery will host Javier Acevedo, the Lead Victim Advocate for UMOS in a webinar focused on labor trafficking in Wisconsin. Every day, UMOS assists the workers on whom we depend, to prevent maltreatment and illegal trafficking. Mr. Acevedo will give us an insider view into the abuse against workers in our communities and how we, as the Church, can help root out trafficking and provide support for the workers. He will also help us announce *our next Presbytery Matthew 25 challenge*, in which everyone can play a part. [Register here for the webinar](#), so that we might live more faithfully into Jesus’ call to show hospitality and care for our neighbors.

