



I WANT MY TACO BELL.

Why can't I have Mt. Olive pickles?



Photos by Annette Bender, *The Call*

injustice is occurring, then we can eat a taco somewhere else," Taylor said.

As for the church, Taylor supports the notion of educating the church community on the injustices of migrant farm workers. He believes the decision to participate in the Taco Bell boycott should then be left up to each individual church member.

BOYCOTT BACKGROUND

When the top legislative body of the United Methodist Church met last spring, it joined national boycotts against two companies, Taco Bell and Mt. Olive Pickle Co.

Both boycotts centered on the treatment of farm workers. The Mt. Olive boycott ended on Sept. 16. (See "Holston bishop had role in pickle dispute.")

The Taco Bell boycott, which officially takes effect for United Methodists on Jan. 1, 2005, was called in March 2001 by the coalition of Immokalee Workers, based in Immokalee, Fla. The coalition said that Taco Bell refused to address the fact that its tomato suppliers, particularly Six L's Packing Company, were exploiting the migrant workers, according to a United Methodist News Service report.

"While globalization has spawned more capital and spurred greater production, workers' wages have been kept low and below a livable wage even in those countries whose governments have a prescribed minimum wage," noted the Taco Bell Boycott resolution adopted by the 2004 United Methodist General Conference.

The average wage for these workers – 40 cents per 32-pound bucket – has not changed in more than 20 years, according to the Department of Labor. Nor are there other protections under the current government program that allows agricultural workers to temporarily enter the United States.

The approved resolution calls for church leaders to name a monitoring committee to assess the negotiations between Taco Bell and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. A May 20 news release stated that YUM! Brands, Taco Bell's parent corporation, would support an industrywide solution to the wage issues. The corporation suggested the possible solution of "a penny a pound surcharge applied to all purchasers of Florida tomatoes, not just Taco Bell."

The proposal came with strings attached, calling for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to first end the boycott the company believes is unfairly focused on Taco Bell, according to United Methodist News Service.

The National Council of Churches monitoring committee issued a June 22 report on the boycott stating that not enough progress had occurred to terminate the boycott.

Other religious endorsers include the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the United Church of Christ, the American Friends Service Committee and the National Council of Churches. The National Council of Churches, of which the United Methodist Church is a member, joined the boycott in November 2003.

TACO LIMBO

Should United Methodists honor their denomination's boycott of the favorite fast-food restaurant?

Steve Hodges, coordinator of Holston's Peace With Justice Committee, said he supports the boycott and feels other United Methodists should prayerfully consider doing the same.

"It is very important for us, as Christians, to think how to spend our money," said Hodges, also director of the Jubilee Project in Sneedville, Tenn. "I do support the action by General Conference. A lot was done before General Conference to get Taco Bell to sit down (at the table to discuss the issue) ... It's an appropriate way to bring justice."

Hodges encourages United Methodists to not only serve others with their gifts and talents within the four walls of the church, but also in the voting booth and while making decisions about businesses to support or not to support.

"When widely supported, economic boycotts do make a difference," he said.

As associate and youth pastor at Asbury UMC in Morristown District, the Rev. Brad Hyde said



his youth members asked many questions about the denomination's decision to boycott Taco Bell. After talking with them about the issue, Hyde said that many never realized that by eating a taco, they could be supporting adverse conditions for farm workers.

"I try to provide a perspective for them," Hyde said. "We don't know the pickers, but I encourage (the youth) to put themselves in their shoes."

"I applaud the United Methodists for its action," the Greeneville pastor added. "The boycotts offer a teaching moment."

The Rev. Steve Martin, associate pastor at First Oak Ridge UMC, made the point that in today's world, where the church's influence and power are shrinking, it is questionable as to how much pressure can be exerted on companies. However, that should not keep the church from taking a stand on issues, he said.

Holston bishop had role in pickle dispute

By Annette Bender

Bishop James Swanson's personal experience – as an African-American steelworker in Houston during the 1970s – led him to support a United Methodist boycott against a North Carolina pickle company.

Swanson was a member of the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) in 1999, when the United Methodist agency first considered supporting a boycott against Mt. Olive Pickle Co. Now resident bishop of Holston Conference, Swanson was previously a member of the South Georgia Conference, serving on the GBCS from 1996 to 2004.

The boycott of Mt. Olive Pickle Co. by the Farm Labor Organizing Committee – an action supported by the United Methodist Church – ended with the signing of two agreements Sept. 16. But the agreements didn't come until years after Swanson and his colleagues had wrestled with the issue, leading the 2004 General Conference to vote in favor of the boycott this past spring.

The boycott came as a last resort, Swanson said, when Mt. Olive initially failed to negotiate for improved wages and working conditions for farm workers who produce cucumbers eventually processed by the North Carolina company.

"We were trying to create a brand-new model for resolving issues between workers and ownership companies, especially in context of the Christian community," Swanson said of his work with the GBCS. Because Mt. Olive is led by President Bill Bryan, a United Methodist himself, and because Christians are called to seek reconciliation, Swanson said that he and other church leaders resisted the boycott for as long as possible.

Swanson also had cause for concern because he was a candidate for the episcopacy this past spring, and leading the denomination to support a controversial boycott could have been harmful to his election.

"But a bishop has got to be fair and just and honest in how he deals with things, and if you can't show that before you're elected, I doubt if you're going to show it afterwards," he said.

A steelworker from 1969 to 1977, Swanson said he has a personal concern for "powerless people." "Being a victim of racism and oppression myself, how in the world could I participate in oppressing someone



else?" he said.

On Sept. 16, Swanson and other church leaders' efforts paid off. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee and the North Carolina Growers Association signed a collective bargaining agreement that covers an estimated 8,500 federal H-2A guest workers from Mexico and other Latin American countries who work on about 1,000 farms. It does not cover workers who may be in the state illegally.

In a separate agreement with the union to settle the boycott, Mt. Olive agreed to increase payments for cucumbers in North Carolina and Ohio by 2.25 percent annually for the next three years, to provide a 3 percent annual supplement to growers providing workers' compensation insurance coverage, and to expand its code of conduct for North Carolina suppliers and growers.

The union contract is believed to be the first in North Carolina agriculture and for an H-2A employer.

"I am one pickle packer who is glad to be out of a pickle," Bill Bryan of Mt. Olive told United Methodist News Service. "It's a big relief to have the boycott behind us so our full attention can be focused on packing quality pickles."

Although the pickle boycott is now over, Swanson said that Holston members should educate themselves about United Methodist boycotts and lend their support.

"My daughter and I both love Mt. Olive pickles," he said, laughing, "but I went on and honored the boycott."

"A lot of folks don't realize that many decisions we make in the United Methodist Church are made because of what our *Book of Discipline* and 'Social Principles' say," he added. "We make some very strong statements about how we feel about organized labor and the rights of people. We need to do a better job of helping people understand why we make our decisions."

Bishop Swanson was recently re-elected to the GBCS for 2005-2008, and at press time, was expected to be elected chair of the GBCS Board of Trustees. Action on the Taco Bell boycott – as well as monitoring of the Mt. Olive agreement – will be considered at the GBCS Board of Directors meeting this month.

Updates on Taco Bell boycott proceedings – including the resolution passed at General Conference – will be provided in the newspaper or online in the near future.

Suzanne C. Hickerson and United Methodist News Service contributed to this report.

WHO'S BEHIND THE UNITED METHODIST BOYCOTTS?

SOME UNITED METHODISTS WILL NOT BE 'RUNNING FOR THE BORDER' ANY TIME SOON TO SINK THEIR TEETH INTO A JUICY TACO BELL BURRITO OR GORDITA.

BY SUZANNE C. HICKERSON

The Mexican fast-food restaurant is a favorite for many, including the Rev. Brian Taylor's nine-year-old daughter, who, according to her father, enjoys the Mexican flare more than the traditional kid-favorite restaurant, McDonald's.

Taylor, senior pastor at Munsey Memorial United

Methodist Church in Johnson City District, said the General Conference 2004 decision to join the Taco Bell boycott has hit home. He has taken advantage of the situation and explained to his daughter that the taco she eats not only affects her, but people around the world.

"When we know of an injustice and as long as the