

Global Farm Challenge – “More than Food”

Podcast Episode 4 with guest Giovana Oaxaca

Ryan: Hello and welcome to ELCA World Hunger’s “More than Food” podcast. This is a chance for us to dive into the stories and people that are part of the Global Farm Challenge and to hear how God is calling us to be active workers for justice in the world accompanying our neighbors and building a just world where all are fed. I’m Ryan

Brooke: and I’m Brooke...

Ryan: and together we are the Hunger Education team with ELCA World Hunger and the hosts of “More than Food.”

In the Global Farm Challenge To-Go Card Game, players get a chance to experience the challenges and opportunities smallholder farmers face around the world. One of the stories featured in the game is based on the many and varied stories of farmworkers in the United States. The challenges farmworkers in the United States faced are significant and wide-ranging. As seasonal laborers they are at higher risk for hunger and poverty, especially if climate-related disasters or other crises threaten their ability to work, and when they are working, they are vulnerable to health risks from heat, pests, workplace hazards and more. And because many are migrants without sufficient legal protection, they can be exploited by employers.

Here to tell us more about this and about the ways ELCA World Hunger is helping to be part of the solution through partners is Giovana Oaxaca, the program director for migration policy for the ELCA, who will tell us more about the real stories behind the game. Giovana, welcome.

Giovana: Hi, thanks for tuning in. My portfolio oversees federal migration policy within the Witnessing in Society office here in Washington, DC. And, for those of you listening, ELCA Advocacy works for national and international policy change based on the experience of Lutheran ministries, programs, and projects around the world, including AMMPARO, the ELCA’s strategy for accompanying migrants.

Ryan: Before we get into the stories of farmworkers, can you share a little about yourself?

Giovana: The stories really resonate with me because of where I grew up. I grew up in a state where there was a large seasonal farmworker community, predominantly Mexican but also of other nationalities. In Oregon, actually, the annual harvest took workers from the apple orchards and strawberry fields to the flower nurseries. I saw them driving past fields, at the restaurants, in local community hubs. They were actually my family and friends. Farmworkers are the engines of growth and vitality in rural communities like these I grew up in. I do think a lot about how my own advocacy was inspired by the work of farmworkers, who organized themselves and advocated for better conditions.



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Ryan: You helped us put together the story for the Global Farm Challenge Card Game based in part on the real stories we hear through our partners in this work, especially the National Farm Worker Ministry. Can you tell us more about this story? What are some of the challenges that farmworkers in the US face?

Giovana: This story we shared is a simplified story of what we see all across Florida and the US writ large. The story is also taking input from the experience of a lot of programs in central America, where we do see, in fact, a lot of young adults leaving their countries to seek opportunities elsewhere. To focus just on Florida, Florida is the reigning capitol of citrus, so it attracts a lot of workers. We'll focus on that. The US Department of Agriculture estimates that enough oranges were produced in 2021 to fill 52.8 million boxes, each weighing about 90 pounds. Farmworkers who are fast, we know, earn more. But this work is very intense for not a lot of pay. So, the bounty we see in grocery stores is only reflecting one facet of the food supply chain. The deepest irony here and the tragedy is that many farmworkers, migrant farmworkers, are fleeing poverty and neglect in their home countries only to experience some forms of marginalization once they get here. Like, the story of this young man in Guatemala (from the card game) who fled to provide for his family, including his family who are facing food insecurity back home. Food insecurity is an issue that I am deeply passionate and wanted to talk about. In the US, farmworkers uphold the agricultural industry, but they are more vulnerable to food insecurity themselves. They are 400 times more likely to experience food insecurity than the general public. Farmworkers may work long and arduous hours to harvest and pick the foods we eat, but they struggle to have access to abundant and culturally-appropriate food themselves to live active, healthy lives. Multiple compounding factors have affected long-term stable access to food, such as the migratory and seasonal nature of their work. And we also know that the legal status affects all of this. Interestingly, the second strongest predictor of food insecurity after income is documentation of legal status, which tells you a lot about how vulnerable people without documentation or temporary documentation are to lack of access to food. We believe that farmworkers shouldn't have to worry about where their next nutritious meal will come from month after month, year after year. All people deserve dignity and respect, and farmworkers should have access to safe, healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food.

Ryan: You mentioned the National Farm Worker Ministry. Where does the National Farm Worker Ministry fit into this? What kind of work do they do with support from ELCA World Hunger?

Giovana: The National Farm Worker Ministry is a faith-based organization which supports farmworkers as they organize for justice, empowerment, including on systemic issues of food justice and food sovereignty. The ELCA is a member organization of the National Farm Worker Ministry, and through the ELCA, I sit on their board of directors and help direct strategy, implementation and funding. And one of the projects I wanted to talk about is the Harvest of Justice. It's an annual program that provides resources, including programs and presentations, videos, social media content and more to help faith communities and others learn about these issues affecting farmworkers. Harvest of Justice really is an opportunity to raise consciousness, to make commitments as consumers and advocates, and to contribute to your local community.



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For example, did you know that you could support different food enterprises with food certifications that are partnered with the National Farm Worker Ministry? Similar to the labels that you see for fair trade, there are food certifications that exist for different foods that you can look at next time you go shopping. And just to say that, as consumers, we do have a lot of power in our purchasing decisions to ensure that the food that we purchase is being collected in a fair and humane manner.

Ryan: It sounds like there are a lot of ties between this project and addressing hunger and poverty in these communities.

Giovana: Absolutely. There are plenty of opportunities to raise awareness of and to take concrete steps through advocacy, through choices as consumers, stemming from these kinds of programs.

Ryan: Why is it important for the church to be involved in this?

Giovana: It's important because nobody deserves to be treated in an undignified way or to be relegated to the shadows. The ELCA vigorously supports farmworkers because no one should have to work in inhumane conditions like those we have seen for many farmworkers across the nation. Being vulnerable to pesticides, to exploitation by your employer, being vulnerable to the effects of climate...those are all things that create inhumane conditions that no one should be required to work in, especially because of their migration status. So, I think it's important for us to continue to be involved, and for people who are awakening their consciousness to the food systems that we live in, the food systems that we partake in, to be aware of where their food comes from, how it came to their table, and the people, the workers behind all of that.

Ryan: A lot to think about there, definitely. When we think of the Global Farm Challenge, we often think of smallholder farmers, but as we've heard, accompanying farmworkers is an important part of the work that we support through ECLA World Hunger. This work is especially critical now, and we are thankful for partners like National Farm Worker Ministry that invite us to be part of it.

If you haven't had a chance to play the Global Farm Challenge To-Go Card Game, you can order your card game set and find a lot more information to be part of this whole church effort at elca.org/globalfarmchallenge. Giovana, thank you for your time with us and for the work that you are doing.

G: Thanks for the opportunity and best wishes on your work.

Ryan: Thanks for joining us today. And remember to check out elca.org/globalfarmchallenge for more episodes and info about the Global Farm Challenge.



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