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For Immediate Release

**Faith Groups Serving as the Backbone for
Coalition of Immokalee Workers' 200-Mile March for Rights, Respect and Fair Food**

On Sunday March 3rd, the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#) (CIW) and faith allies from Florida and across the nation gathered at Jesus the Worker Roman Catholic Church in Ft. Myers, Florida and embarked on a 200 mile [March for Rights, Respect and Fair Food](#) that will culminate at the Lakeland-FL based headquarters of Publix Supermarkets on Sunday, March 17th. Marchers are calling on the Florida-based grocery giant to honor the breakthrough social responsibility partnership for farm labor reform known as the Fair Food Program (FFP). Religious congregations are providing blessings, food and housing all along the entire route.

“People of faith are jointly proclaiming that God desires justice and that we are all called to love our neighbors whether they live next door or whether they harvest the tomatoes that we purchase at Publix. That’s why Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, Methodists, Evangelicals, Unitarian Universalists, Jews and many other people of faith are marching alongside farmworkers,” said the Rev. Russell Meyer, Executive Director of the Florida Council of Churches.

“For more than three years, farmworkers and their supporters have been inviting Publix to participate in a proven program to improve wages and conditions in the fields that is supported by eleven other corporations and the vast majority of Florida growers. They have steadfastly refused to even enter into the conversation, essentially evading their responsibility to Florida's farmworkers, to Florida's tomato growers, and to its own customers,” explained the Reverend Robert Moses of St. David's Episcopal Church of Lakeland. “It’s deeply disappointing and we hope that this demonstration of broad support will change Publix executives’ minds and their hearts as well.”

The [Fair Food Program](#) is a collaborative effort among the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, corporate food buyers and the [vast majority of Florida tomato growers](#). Participating corporate buyers agree both to help increase workers' pay, by paying a penny-per-pound price premium and having the growers that supply them pass this onto workers in their paychecks, and to purchase Florida tomatoes only from those growers who are in compliance with the Fair Food Code of Conduct. While [eleven major food buyers](#) in fast-food, foodservice and the grocery industries are participating (such as McDonald’s, Subway, Aramark, and Trader Joes), Publix has refused.

The two-week march is a herculean undertaking as hundreds of people make this pilgrimage and hundreds more make it possible. Local congregations are serving as the backbone of support.

“Our congregation is honored to support this profound witness by providing a meal for the marchers,” said the Rev. Victoria ByRoade, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Dunedin, Florida. “To do so is a Lenten practice, where we reflect on the way our systemic and personal

relationships have been marred by sin and recommit ourselves to follow Jesus proclaiming ‘good news to the poor’ in word and deed.”

All along the march route, regional and national faith leaders will lead services of prayer and offer words of encouragement. On Thursday evening, March 14th, Bishop Edward R. Benoway of the Florida-Bahama Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will bless the marchers. On Saturday, March 16th, Bishop Lynch of the Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg will bless the marchers as they set off on the last leg to Publix headquarters in Lakeland. That evening Bishop Noonan of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orlando will join marchers at the Publix Produce Distribution Center in Lakeland and offer a blessing.

Bishop Noonan’s blessing comes a year after his powerful words during the farmworkers six-day Fast for Fair Food in March 2012 when he said, “We urge the Publix corporate leaders to support this initiative that promotes dignity and justice ... We pray that God will inspire them to work in collaboration with the Immokalee Workers to advance the rights of agricultural workers.”

Best-selling Christian author, Shane Claiborne, will also be joining the march for the final weekend and speak at the celebration at 4:00pm on Sunday March 17th, when the marchers arrive at Publix headquarters in Lakeland, Florida.

The CIW and the Campaign for Fair Food have been supported for years by many major faith bodies including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church (U.S.A.), Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Unitarian Universalist Association, Pax Christi, Sojourners and more recently by T’ruah (formerly Rabbis for Human Rights-North America) and International Justice Mission.

“The United Methodist Church has supported the CIW’s efforts and lauds the ground-breaking accomplishments of the Fair Food Program,” said Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society for the more than 12 million member United Methodist Church. “We call upon Publix to support these advances in human rights and join the Fair food Program; for as Jesus says, ‘to whom much has been given, much is required.’”

As farmworkers and their allies make their way toward Lakeland, people of faith across the country will follow the march’s progress through denominational updates and the CIW’s website.

“The faith community has been an irreplaceable and loving force within the Campaign for Fair Food since its earliest days,” said CIW member Santiago Perez. “This march would not have been possible without their support, generosity, and faith in the essential work of affirming the dignity and worth of every human being.”

The CIW and its allies are marching to mark the enormous progress made to change conditions through the Fair Food Program and the hard work yet to be done to bring the supermarket industry — chief among them Publix which continues to [undermine that progress](#) and [deny their responsibility](#) — on board to do their part to end decades of farmworker poverty and degradation.

“The National Farm Worker Ministry has supported the CIW since their beginning days of self-determination for farm workers. I walked on the CIW’s first march back in 2000, which awakened people of faith and local congregations to the exploitation in the tomato fields in Florida,” said Roberta Perry, a native of DeLand, Florida, member of New Hope United Church of Christ, and representative of the National Farmworker Ministry. “I’m walking this year to celebrate the distance we’ve come in addressing abuses in the fields, the concrete advances the Fair Food Program has made, and to urge Publix to walk with us into a new, humane tomato industry that’s underway.” ##

About Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida: Interfaith Action is a network of people of faith and religious institutions that works in partnership with the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#) (CIW) to improve sub-poverty wages and end modern-day slavery and human rights abuses in the fields. Interfaith Action brings the spiritual resources of diverse faith traditions and the moral weight of faith-based voices in society to our work in collaboration with farmworkers for justice in the fields.

About the Coalition of Immokalee Workers: The CIW (www.ciw-online.org) is a community-based farmworker organization headquartered in Immokalee, Florida, with over 4,000 members. The CIW seeks modern working conditions for farmworkers and promotes their fair treatment in accordance with national and international human rights standards. The CIW's Campaign for Fair Food has won unprecedented support for fundamental farm labor reforms from retail food industry leaders, with the goal of enlisting the market power of those companies to bring about more humane labor standards in their tomato suppliers' operations.