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## Study guide

# The secret life of dairy workers

By Robert C. Blezard

Not just on dairies, you see them everywhere—walking on the street, shopping in supermarkets, dining in restaurants, driving on the highways, and working in factories, farms, orchards, construction sites, hotels and restaurants. You *see* them, but may not recognize them because they don't want to be noticed. They are undocumented immigrants, and they account for a surprisingly large segment of our nation's workforce and consumer base. What does our faith say about our relationship with them?

### Exercise 1: In your midst?

As in the case of the Vermont dairies, the existence of undocumented workers is an "open secret" in many communities. Is it in yours? Discuss:

- Who are the undocumented people in your community? Where are they from?
- Where do the undocumented people in your community live? Under what conditions?
- Where do they work? Are they treated well? Paid well?
- Are they well thought of or maligned by the community? Are they treated with respect or scorn?
- Do you or your congregation interact with them? How or why not?
- What could your congregation do to help them?

### Exercise 2: Love the foreigner

Numerous Scripture passages reveal God's desire that faithful people treat the strangers in their lands with respect, honor and dignity. Along with widows and orphans, foreigners are characterized in the Bible as people especially vulnerable for exploitation and hardship. This is pointedly revealed in the command of Leviticus 19:33-34. Read Leviticus 19:1-34 and discuss:

- Verse 1 reveals the authority of all the teachings that follow. What is that authority?
- Although not one of the two "Ten Commandments" texts (found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 3), Leviticus 19 includes many from that sacred list. Identify passages from Leviticus 19 that are also among the 10 commandments. What does that signify about the importance of the commands found in the whole chapter?



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- Turning to verses 33-34, in what ways might foreigners have been oppressed or mistreated in biblical days? In what are foreigners mistreated or oppressed today in our world? In our country? In your state? In your community?
- God calls for foreigners to be treated as citizens among God's people. Why would that have been important in biblical times? Why is that important today? In what ways are foreigners treated like citizens in our country? In what ways are they not?
- Leviticus 19:18 commands God's people to love their neighbors as themselves, and then verse 34 commands God's people to love foreigners as themselves. How do these two commands relate to one another?
- How does Leviticus 19:18 and 34 relate to Jesus' command that we love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31)? Add to that the teaching of Luke 10:25-37 that even foreigners and people of a different faith tradition are our neighbors.
- In what ways are Christians in our nation loving the aliens as ourselves? Can you think of specific examples? In what ways are we failing to love the alien as ourselves?
- When you think of the popular political speech dealing with immigrants and current and proposed public policies, is the United States following the directives of Leviticus 19:33-34 and Mark 12:30-31? Explain.
- If Scripture guides our political hearts and minds, what kind of policies would we advocate for concerning foreigners in our midst?

### Exercise 3: Welcome the stranger

Matthew 25:31-46 offers a glimpse into the priorities of God for God's faithful people. Read the passage and discuss.

- Why is the Son of Man gathering all nations? Why are they being separated into goats and sheep?
- What are the criteria for whether one is a goat or a sheep?
- What happens to the goats? What happens to the sheep?
- What has treatment of the stranger to do with whether one is a goat or a sheep?
- What lessons can we take as we consider our and our nation's response to foreigners in our midst?
- What can or should you do? Your congregation? Our church?



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### Exercise 4: The ELCA weighs in

In the social policy resolution titled "Toward Compassionate, Just and Wise Immigration Reform," the ELCA Church Council asserts that the U.S. immigration system is broken. (Search for the statement on [lirs.org](http://lirs.org).)

Consider these excerpts and discuss how they relate to the situation of the dairy farmers in Vermont described in the *Living Lutheran* article, as well as how they may relate to undocumented workers in your community or state:

- Many without legal immigration status, desperate to survive and provide for their families, consistently risk dangerous border crossings and abrupt, forced separation from their families after they arrive. These alternatives are considered better than the socio-economic pressures they face in their home countries.
- Although laws prohibit employers from hiring unauthorized workers, many employers, for a variety of reasons, are not in compliance. Numerous major industries (e.g., agriculture, construction and hospitality), small businesses and family households across America find such workers indispensable.
- Many employers turn to the undocumented workforce for flexible, industrious and low-cost labor to do work U.S. citizens often will not do. The cost savings, however, are realized at the expense of unauthorized workers and the wider community when employers pay lower wages, evade state and federal taxes, and withhold payment for benefits such as health and disability insurance.
- Fearing immigration officials, detention and deportation because of their unauthorized status, undocumented workers are vulnerable to exploitation. Consequently, unfair and unsafe work conditions often go unchecked, illnesses and injuries go untreated, crimes and abuse go unreported, and this country's labor laws often go unenforced.
- Further, the practice of detaining immigrants is skyrocketing, even while alternatives have proved more humane, less costly and more effective. ... Vulnerable people such as families with children, torture survivors, asylum seekers, trafficking victims, and those with serious medical conditions such as HIV and AIDS are detained pending court hearings for civil immigration violations. They are jailed in remote federal prisons and detention centers, contract prison facilities, and rented space in local jails and state prisons, and are often mixed in with criminal populations. Most detainees lack legal counsel and many suffer from overcrowding, inadequate medical and mental health care, vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse, and neglect leading in some cases to death.



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### Exercise 5: Get busy

“Toward Compassionate, Just and Wise Immigration Reform” (see previous exercise) is dated 2009 and doesn’t reflect the most recent developments in immigration law, including the 2017 crackdown on undocumented aliens under the Trump administration. The statement urges Lutherans to stay informed and get involved to push for humane, reasonable immigration reform.

For the latest information and action steps to advocate for immigration reform and humane policies, ELCA members can turn to a ministry partner, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. Its website, [lirs.org](http://lirs.org), offers the latest developments in immigration and refugee law, as well as concrete ways that Lutherans can raise their voices and make a difference.

# The secret life of dairy workers

By Anne Basye



**T**hat quart of milk you bought today? A cow and a herd of humans is behind it: Employees who homogenize, bottle and deliver it to your store; the lab technician who checks it for quality and safety; workers who make disinfectants for cows and dairy machines; the truck driver who picks up the milk from the farm; the farmer who owns the cows and grows the silage; the nutritionist who supervises their feeding; and the laborers who clean the stalls, feed the cows and milk them.

Like Maria. On a dairy farm in Franklin County, Vt., she and three co-workers feed and milk 750 cows, twice a day.

For everyone living on a dairy farm, keeping cows healthy and productive is a 24-hour concern. Shifts are long and days off are few.

Maria (name withheld) and her co-workers face an additional restriction. Like half the workers on U.S. dairy farms—and well above 60 percent in Vermont—they are immigrants, all from Mexico,

according to the Franklin Alliance for Rural Ministries (FARM) website ([farministry.com](http://farministry.com)). Undocumented, Maria doesn't venture much beyond the farm.

"These [dairy workers] live in isolation, far from home," said Kim Erno, director of FARM, an ecumenical ministry of the ELCA based at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Swanton, Vt. FARM provides accompaniment to Latino migrant workers and their families.

"Most Vermont workers come from the poorest states in southern Mexico, where trade agreements that permitted the dumping of low-price U.S. corn have devastated the local economy and forced small farmers off the land," Erno said. "Folks are not coming to pursue the American dream but fleeing a global economic disaster."

Erno knows one young man who supports seven people in Chiapas, Mexico, with his dairy wages. Maria, from Mexico City, hopes to earn enough to

return home, buy a house for her family and start a business. Unless she is detained and deported—a possibility that troubles the National Milk Producers Federation, which estimates that losing workers to deportation would nearly double retail milk prices.

Deportation isn't the only issue that concerns Vermont dairy farmers. Industry consolidation pressures smaller dairies to increase their herds. Milk production is going up, but consumption isn't. A strong U.S. dollar has tightened the export market for dairy products. And as government milk prices move from \$20 a hundredweight down to \$11, farmers are often in the red, said Alan Mesman, a milk industry expert.

While dairy farming is increasingly mechanized, people are still needed. As farmers age and their children choose non-farm careers, help must come from outside the family. Dependable workers like Maria and her family must cover extra shifts as unreliable workers come and go.

Marginalized by language and legal status, Vermont dairy workers can be vulnerable to exploitation, Erno said. Some farmers try to make up for profit-squeezing external factors by scrimping on wages and working and living conditions, Mesman added.

### **Pastoral presence, advocacy make a difference**

Enter Erno. An ELCA missionary in Mexico City from 2002 to 2010, an Episcopal priest and Franklin County native, he connects deeply with both dairy workers and farmers. He calls himself “a sort of circuit rider” whose ministry is visiting workers like Maria in their homes and workplaces, driving them to medical appointments, interpreting when necessary, officiating at funerals and weddings, and, lately,



Photo: Courtesy of Kim Erno

A delegation from Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Jericho, Vt., visits a dairy farm where Kim Erno accompanies migrant workers.

taking part in vigils outside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center.

Pastoral presence makes a difference, Maria said. In cases where conditions are sketchy, salaries too low or abuse is taking place—a hazard for some women workers—“the boss knows we are not alone.”

**“If people are concerned about milk quality and the well-being of cows, then why not workers? As Christians, we are called to God’s reign, where both people and creation are to be respected.”**

Erno, Maria and FARM also participate in larger justice movements like the Milk with Dignity campaign, which seeks to establish a third-party verification system to certify that milk is sourced from dairies offering dignified housing and just labor practices.

“If people are concerned about milk quality and the well-being of cows, then why not workers?” Erno asked. “As Christians, we are called to God’s reign, where both people and creation are to be respected.”

### **Going home and staying there**

Recently, Erno drove a couple to the post office to send packages of belongings back to their hometown in the state of Tabasco. The husband has been working in Vermont for seven years, and his wife for one. Now they are returning to Mexico and their 8-year-old son, who has been living with his grandparents. They hope their years in dairies are behind them.

So does Erno, who sees in the parable of the loaves and fishes the first steps toward achieving what he calls “the right to stay home.”

“When Jesus organized the community gathered to hear him, everyone was satisfied,” Erno said. “No one was separated from their homeland and sent away hungry to places like Vermont in order to support their families.” **L**

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