

## The Scandal Of Publix and The Coalition of Immokalee Workers: A Christian Critique

09/24/2012



**Brian D. McLaren**



Author, 'A New Kind of Christianity' and 'The Great Spiritual Migration'

A Presbyterian minister enters a Publix grocery store in Florida to buy a sandwich at the deli. Store management calls the police and they escort him from the store, telling him his grocery-shopping privileges have been revoked for a year. What? Why? [What's the backstory?](#)

As the [Herald Tribune](#) explains, earlier that day, some friends of mine - supporters of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) - had been protesting in front of that store in Sarasota, FL. After the protest had ended, the Rev. Clay Thomas entered the deli on a sandwich-buying mission - wearing a CIW T-shirt. The store management called the police and Rev. Thomas was escorted from the store and told he couldn't return for a year.

I love shopping at Publix - there's one walking distance from my home - but I must say, now I wonder if I'll be escorted from the store sometime soon for being a known supporter of CIW. That would be sad, [but I guess it could happen.](#)

Like Rev. Thomas, I'm part of [a growing movement](#) of people who realize that there is a moral dimension to capitalism. With every purchase, our dollars "vote" for companies. Of course, some companies have better prices and products than others - but that's not the end of the story. Some companies are more careful of the environment than others. Some companies take better care of their employees than others. Some companies are more responsive to the community than others. Some companies work harder to ensure well-being down their supply chains than others.

Because of our moral commitments - rooted in our faith commitments, more and more of us don't stop with price and product quality - we're concerned about justice and corporate responsibility too.

So more and more of us want to reward the more responsible companies with our business. That's especially true regarding food. Since we need it every day, we understand that we are connected by the food we eat to the stores that sell the food, the transporters who ship it, the farmers who grow it, and the workers who plant and harvest it.

Many of us who live in the South keep wondering why Publix, a major grocery chain, refuses to join other major food companies - like McDonald's, Taco Bell, and (most recently) Trader Joe's in the Fair Food Program, a collaborative, state-wide initiative. The program brings together the Coalition

of Immokalee Workers, 90 percent of FL tomato growers, and 10 corporate food buyers. Through the program, corporate buyers commit to purchase only from FL tomato growers who uphold human rights standards and to pay one penny per pound more for tomatoes. The tomato growers pass that penny on to farm workers. Tomato harvesters are some of the most poorly-treated and poorly-paid people in America, and Publix has the opportunity and the power to help change this.

We've been trying to talk with Publix leadership about this Fair Food Campaign for quite a while now. Their persistence in avoiding honest, civil, and transparent conversation has been quite surprising. There have been fasts, attempted visits, protests, pray-ins, and other peaceful public actions intended to communicate to Publix the strength of our desire to have honest dialogue with them.

The chain's behavior is strange, especially in light of the seven values [they teach all their managers](#), according to business expert Howard Lewinter:

They say:

1) Be There

Be visible. Get out of your office! Talk and listen to your employees. Work along side your employees.

— We wish Publix leadership would listen to us, their customers and talk with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers about the Fair Food Program.

They say:

2) Giving is the Only Way to Get

Never forget anyone who helped you along the way to business success.

— We wish Publix would realize how much Farm Workers help them in their business success, and that they would become enthusiastic leaders - not laggards and obstructionists - when it comes to the Campaign for Fair Food (which isn't going away - it is only growing).

They say:

3) Invest in Others

George Jenkins acknowledged, "One of the most important lessons I've learned in my business career is that no man put together an organization on his own."

— If it weren't for farm workers, there wouldn't be much to sell at Publix! And if it weren't for customers there would be no business at all. Farmworkers and consumers are Publix's neighbors, and it would be great if we could work together to invest in others for the common good.

They say:

#### 4) Respect the Dignity of the Individual

George Jenkins believed, “If you want people to respect you or your company, you must first show respect for them.”

— I doubt Rev. Clay Thomas feels much in the way of respect from Publix. Nor do the growing numbers of us who are joining the Campaign. And the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a human rights award-winning workers’ organization, has been rebuffed by the company for years. We’re people and we deserve more respect than what Publix has shown us thus far.

They say:

#### 5) The Customer is Queen (and King)

Always provide the customer with what she or he wants. Always treat the customer with respect. Be proud of a job well done.

— Of course, we customers are telling Publix, again and again, what we want: for Publix to join the Fair Food Program, and to join us in ensuring a fair wage and humane conditions for farm workers.

They say:

#### 6) Prepare for Opportunity

George Jenkins advised, “Prepare yourself. The opportunities are up for grabs.” Jenkins likened Publix to “a smorgasbord, with opportunity spread out for you.”

Opportunity includes going beyond the call of customer service - going the extra distance to further cement long-term relationships with your customers.

— It’s hard to imagine why Publix would want to miss this excellent opportunity to become a moral leader in the grocery industry by becoming an enthusiastic participant in the Fair Food Program. The Program is proven, it has been operational for several years; it has been lauded by the US government; it is delivering real results not only to farmworkers but to participating growers and corporations as well.

They say:

#### 7) Do the Right Thing

George Jenkins business philosophy included, “Never let making a profit stand in the way of doing the right thing.”

— In this light, it’s especially strange that Publix has refused to pass on just a penny a pound to farm workers. Not only that, but they’ve [mischaracterized the campaign](#) in public statements, saying they would participate if, rather than “paying employees of other companies directly for their labor,” they could instead just pay an extra penny per pound in the price of tomatoes, for tomato growers to then distribute to farm workers. Actually this is precisely how the Fair Food Program already works! (And this explains why the [Tampa Bay Times called Publix “disingenuous”](#) for continuing to mislead with this statement). Maybe it’s simply a misunderstanding and not disingenuousness, but either way, so far Publix just refuses to take part.

According to Lewinter, Publix founder George Jenkins had a plaque on his wall that said, "Begin. The rest is easy."

A simple call to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (239-657-8311) would open a conversation that can begin a new day for Publix and for the farmworkers who make its business possible.

My suspicion is that Publix would rather be making headlines as a moral leader in the Fair Food Campaign than they enjoy making headlines for calling in the police to expel potential customers - especially Christian pastors. If they'll just begin, the rest will be easy. If they still believe in George Jenkins' seven principles - and I think they really want to - they have a lot to gain by doing so.

**Follow Brian D. McLaren on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/brianmclaren](https://www.twitter.com/brianmclaren)**