

Closed New York church finds new life as center for farmworkers

Agricultural laborers often work long hours without overtime or paid days off. They're part of running a new center in Long Island to advocate for their rights.

by [David Paulsen](#) in the [January 3, 2018](#) issue

For a long time the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, New York, has partnered with a nonprofit agency that gives voice to the concerns of the region's farm laborers.

Now the agency—Rural and Migrant Ministry—and the diocese are working with other faith-based partners, including the Presbytery of Long Island, to turn a church that closed into a center for farmworkers, many of them Hispanic.

The Center of Alliance, Solidarity and Accompaniment will be located at Grace Episcopal Church in Riverhead, New York, which closed early in 2017.

The church already has become a regular meeting place for a council of farmworkers who are helping to develop plans for the diocesan property in Riverhead, which includes the church, a rectory, and a parish hall. Leadership counseling, vocational training, and English as a second language classes are among the possible future uses.

“There are so many possibilities,” said Gerardo Romo Garcia, who leads the diocese's Latino outreach on Long Island's East End. He emphasized that by reaching out to the community of laborers, church leaders hope to “empower the workers and teach them how to empower themselves.”

Rural and Migrant Ministry, founded by the Diocese of New York in the early 1980s, is based in Poughkeepsie. A little more than a year ago, as the agency was looking for a location for a new center, it had become clear that the congregation at Grace Episcopal was not sustainable, said Mary Beth Welsh, executive director of Episcopal Ministries of Long Island, which provides fundraising and ministry-building support to

the diocese and its congregations. But the property still was “a great space for us to serve and engage the communities of the East End of the island.”

While a school and day care center continued to operate on the Grace Episcopal Church grounds, the diocese decided to turn the other church facilities into a ministry center, including for use by Rural and Migrant Ministry and the people it serves.

The focus on outreach to immigrant laborers on the East End is part of Long Island bishop Lawrence Provenzano’s effort to bring the church to a community that had been mostly overlooked by the diocese in the past.

“This is our call to minister to this group of people who have been in our midst as an almost invisible population,” Provenzano said.

Farmworkers in the local agriculture industry often work long hours without overtime or paid days off. In 2016 the March for Farmworker Justice from Suffolk County went to the state capital, Albany, to advocate for farm laborers’ rights. Members of the newly formed CASA council hope their voices will be heard even more loudly now that they have a permanent gathering place in Riverhead.

“The Diocese of Long Island has really thrown themselves into this,” said Richard Witt, Rural and Migrant Ministry’s executive director and an Episcopal priest. The people his agency serves “are used to being told they don’t belong somewhere, and so here’s a place where not only are they told they belong, but they’re being invited to help run it.” —Episcopal News Service