

The Fayetteville Observer (NC)
<http://www.fayobserver.com/article?id=283655>

Fiery sermons inspire Smithfield workers
January 22, 2008
By Laura Arenschield
Staff writer

Their yellow shirts filled the first few rows inside First Baptist Church on Moore Street. Those who couldn't understand English heard the service translated through headphones.

Some raised their hands in praise when a preacher's words moved them.
Some raised their voices in song when the choir's melody touched them.
Some sat silent and simply listened.

The service on Monday honored the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. It honored Cesar Chavez.

But it also honored the people in the yellow shirts: the Smithfield Packing Co. employees and the people who have been working to increase their rights.

And it celebrated a minor victory in that fight for workers' rights: For the first time, Martin Luther King Jr. Day was a paid holiday for employees of the Smithfield Packing Co. plant in Tar Heel.

About halfway through the 2-hour service, four Smithfield workers climbed behind the pulpit. One by one, they told stories of the problems faced by workers at the Tar Heel plant:

- * Fingers lost to the plant's cutting machines.
- * Hours worked but never compensated for.
- * Intense killing schedules that lead to accidents.

The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union has, since 1992, tried to unionize the workers at the Tar Heel plant without success.

Gene Bruskin, director of UFCW's national Smithfield campaign, said that without a union, workers have no way to voice those problems.

"They are injured every day, they face disrespect from their supervisors, sexual harassment," he said. And while this year, Monday was a holiday, "next year, they could say, 'We're busy, we're going to take it back.'"

King fought for workers' rights, and Chavez co-founded the United Farm Workers, which fought for benefits and fair pay for farm workers.

Organizers hoped the service on Monday would inspire the workers.

And in fiery sermons delivered by clergy from a range of religions, it did.

The Rev. Maria Palmer, a pastor who founded a Spanish-speaking church in Orange County, looked around the church and said King and Chavez would have been proud to see "black and brown and white people committed to struggling together for justice."

She admonished the people in the church to stand up for immigrants.

"We have to face what happens in every Smithfield packing plant, in every Perdue plant and in every field around North Carolina."

A projector flashed images on the wall throughout the service: Photographs of King. Quotes from his speeches. Pictures of Chavez. The "Justice at Smithfield" logo.

The Rev. Michael Battle, president of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta and the service's keynote speaker, said if King were alive, he would be fighting for the Smithfield workers.

"King would be right here in Fayetteville, North Carolina," Battle said. "He would say to the brothers and sisters: 'Give me a yellow shirt that I may wear it as well.'"

Staff writer Laura Arenschiold can be reached at arenschioldl@fayobserver.com or 486-3572.