

CHRISTMAS IN THE VINEYARD

By Larry Hiller
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In late December a chill mist shrouds the bare vines in the predawn darkness. The vineyard is silent except for one section, which is filled with voices and a bright, crackling bonfire. It is Christmas morning, and elsewhere in this valley, people are still warm in their beds or gathered around Christmas trees watching excited children. But not the small group in the vineyard. They have come to give a gift.

To understand the meaning of the gift, you must know that this vineyard in Madera, California, USA, is part of the Church's welfare production system. Each year it produces about 400,000 pounds (180,000 kg) of raisins. Half of the harvest goes to the shelves of bishops' storehouses. The rest is used for humanitarian response around the world. Wards and branches from eight stakes are assigned certain tasks to complete and rows of vines to care for.

One crucial task is pruning the vines. The tangle of the past season's growth must be cut out, leaving just the few canes that will grow to produce the next harvest. Without this dormant-season pruning, the vineyard becomes overgrown. Too many vines overwhelm the roots' ability to sustain them. Too little fruit is produced, and the harvest is greatly diminished.

Why do this work on Christmas day? Because many of the ward members are fieldworkers by trade, pruning vineyards and orchards for their



What motivates a group of Latter-day Saints to leave their homes on Christmas for a day of hard work? Their desire to serve Him whose birth we celebrate.

livelihood. Their work is intensive at this time of year, so this is the only day they have off in several weeks. It's Christmas—and they spend it here in the Church's vineyard. In fact, they have come here 8 of the past 15 Christmases. For these members of the Spanish-speaking Madera Third Ward, it is their gift to El Niño—to the Christ child.

One worker, Miguel Chavez, explains that it's a way of giving something back for all of the blessings they receive from the Lord: "We are giving something to needy families. Our small contribution becomes a great blessing to other people." Another ward member says simply, "This is the best work we can do because this is God's vineyard."

And so, on this particular Christmas day, once these members of the Madera Third Ward finish pruning, wrapping, and tying their assigned vines, they finish parts of two neighboring wards' rows. It is a gift fit for a King. ■