

Building a Better World, One Sip at a Time

By Rich Aronson

One day “Right will dwell in the desert and justice will abide in the orchard. Justice will bring about peace; and right will produce calm and security. My people will live in peaceful country, in secure dwellings and quiet resting places.” These words spoken through the prophet Isaiah [32:16-18, New American Bible], describe God’s vision of a new world community; a community to be constructed, brick by brick, through loving acts of mercy and compassion like the ones demonstrated by the Good Samaritan in our scripture lesson.

Unfortunately this vision is not yet reality. Today perhaps no greater barrier to building a peaceful and just global community is the willingness of the few to profit at the expense of the many. All around the globe, millions of our neighbors toil in conditions we can’t even imagine, for wages that fail to provide any measure of stability or security.

I believe God expects us to support these exploited workers by speaking out against this injustice. I also believe we are called to use the wealth that God has placed in our care to bring about positive change on their behalf. For faithful Christians, meeting this challenge can be extremely difficult. The sad truth is that the exploitation of workers in the developing world has become standard operating procedure in the new global economy.

Nowhere is this problem more acute than in the coffee industry. Coffee is the second most heavily traded commodity in the world. It originates from either plantations that are traditionally run and owned by wealthy landowners or small family-run operations that are primarily owned by impoverished farmers. These small farmers frequently live in isolated communities, relying on middlemen in addition to processors, creditors, exporters, and brokers to buy their coffee.

Fluctuating prices on the commodities market make it very difficult for farmers to plan for the future. Prices are often below the cost of production. The way the system is set up, the farmer can not get a just return for their labor. When we purchase coffee, we unwittingly participate in a system that traps so many coffee farmers and their families in the developing world in an inescapable cycle of poverty. In addition, many large producers have switched to a variety of coffee that needs full sunlight, unlike traditional coffee bushes that grow in the shade. To produce “sun-grown coffee,” trees must be removed. Clear-cutting forests destroys the ecosystem and endangers local and migratory birds.

Hundreds of thousands of small coffee farmers and workers have lost their jobs due to the current coffee crisis. In many situations, these farmers must choose between starvation and growing illicit crops like coca, which is used to make cocaine. Others have lost their land or left their homes in search of jobs so they can feed their families.

Despite all these gloomy facts and figures, the world’s small coffee farmers can survive and maybe even thrive. We can help our neighbors accomplish this by buying fair trade coffee, tea, cocoa, chocolate and other products. Fair trade is an alternative economic model based on the premise that “good business” and “the common good” are NOT mutually exclusive terms.

The United Methodist Social Principles state that “Consumers should exercise their economic power to... avoid purchasing products made in conditions where workers are being exploited...[and] we call upon consumers, including local congregations and Church-related institutions, to organize to achieve [this goal].” (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2000*, ¶163D)

In response to this clarion call, The United Methodist Committee on Relief of the General Board of Global Ministries has developed the UMCOR Coffee Project. The Coffee Project's mission is to educate local churches about the fair trade economic model, and to provide opportunities for supporting this system that nurtures, rather than diminishes, God's vision of abundant life.

UMCOR's partner in this project is the employee-owned fair trade organization called Equal Exchange. In 1991, Equal Exchange became the first company in the United States to adopt internationally recognized fair trade standards. The international standards are based on 5 basic principles:

- Pay a fair price to farmers;
- work with democratically run farming cooperatives that are owned and governed by and for the farmers themselves;
- buy directly from these co-ops so that the benefits and profits from trade actually reach the farmers and their communities;
- provide vitally important advance credit to farmers; and
- encourage ecologically sustainable farming practices.

Today, the organization remains one of the few companies committed to these standards on 100% of its coffee, tea, cocoa, and chocolate products.

Equal Exchange's Interfaith Program has relationships with the United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian, Unitarian Universalist, and American Catholic churches. Through these partnerships, thousands of churches, places of worship and faith-based organizations nationwide are involved in Fair Trade; serving fairly traded coffee at fellowship hour, offering fairly traded products at fundraisers and holiday bazaars, and spreading the word in their communities.

By participating in the Equal Exchange Interfaith Program, our United Methodists help support community-based initiatives such as a coffee processing plant in El Salvador, community stores in Colombia, the training of doctors and nurses in Mexico, reforestation programs in Costa Rica, or new schools in Peru. These are all examples of the initiatives that local co-ops have created with the income and support of Equal Exchange and other Fair Trade Organizations. In addition, for every package of coffee, tea, cocoa or chocolate purchased by local congregations, Equal Exchange makes a contribution to faith-based agencies that are focused on the critical areas of sustainable agriculture and development in associated farming communities.

In a world so thoroughly inundated with the sins of greed and exploitation, fair trade presents us with the opportunity to make a real contribution towards the creation of a new "life-centered" economic model; one based on the Christian principles of justice, cooperation and sustainability.

So the next time we get together after Sunday worship to enjoy a nice hot cup of Equal Exchange's "Fellowship Blend," remember that the coffee we're drinking is much more than a great way to get our day started. We're helping to build a better world, one sip at a time.

Alternate ending: So the next time we get together after Sunday worship, let's remember that by choosing to support fair trade we could be doing much more than enjoying fellowship and a nice hot cup of coffee, tea, or cocoa. We could be helping to build a better world, one sip at a time.

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