

# Making Our Cup of Coffee Part of God's Economy

~ **Karla Kauffman** ~

Most congregations in the US and Canada participate in the world's biggest economic items every Sunday. The gas we use to get to church and the coffee we drink while we're there are the top two most valuable commodities on the world market. Excluding the illegal drug market, coffee is second only to oil as the most valuable item in the world's legal economy. Our coffee choices impact the lives of many people we will never meet.

## **Coffee – Happy in the Shade**

Coffee is actually a seed -the 'pit' of a cherry-like fruit of the tropical coffee tree. Coffee trees do best at high altitudes, shaded by taller trees in forests. However, there is a trend to cut down rainforests to plant coffee plantations: sunny rows in low-lying areas. This produces a bean in three years instead of five, so the owner gets a quicker return. But these beans are not as high quality as shade-grown coffee. And many birds (including hummingbirds and warblers) and other species which thrive in rainforests have lost their home as rainforests have been cut down for the plantations.

## **Small Farms and Large Plantations**

More than half of the world's coffee is grown on family plots of 25 acres or less, not on plantations. Farmers can usually support their family if they receive around a dollar a pound. In recent years, though, farmers are getting anywhere from 25 to 75 cents per pound. After several years of being unable to pay their bills, many farmers lose their land. They often look for work in nearby towns, or send a family or village member 'up north' to send money back. If all these fail, the farm families become immigrants to another country, often the United States.

## **Pesticides on Plantations**

Unprotected workers on coffee plantations walk the rows, spraying them with pesticides. Not only are the workers at great danger, but the water supply in coffee growing areas has high levels of nitrates and other substances. There are high rates of birth defects in those areas. Many of these pesticides (including DDT) are illegal in the US but are legal in the coffee growing countries. Small farmers can't afford the pesticides, so their coffee is mostly pesticide-free. Plus, they grow their coffee among other plants, so they are less vulnerable to insect predators.

## **God's Economy**

Someone has said that a budget is a congregation's most significant theological document; it reveals where our values truly are. Many congregations buy the cheapest supplies in order to be good stewards. However, there are many hidden expenses in those cheap goods. The coffee in big cans comes from the plantations where workers are unprotected, the animals are losing their homes, and the workers have low wages and no job security. Buying that coffee supports huge multinational executives and hurts the farmers, the animals, and the land.

Douglas Meeks says in *God the Economist*, "The 'household of God' exists as an agent of God's work to make the world into a household in which all of God's creatures will find access to life.

The church's...evangelization and mission will have...to focus on God's economy in relation to the world's existing economies." (Fortress Press, 1989, p.45)

What is God's economy? Meeks claims that God's gift of Jesus to us is "what obligates, moves, and empowers our lives for serving life against death in the world." (p.119) Much of Jesus' teaching was about 'serving life,' showing us how to prioritize our lives so that everyone has enough and so that none of us, poor or rich, are obsessed with possessions. Jesus taught about life-giving economics. One recent experiment in a life-giving economy is the alternative trade movement, now called Fair Trade.

### **The Fair Trade Movement – Started by Faith Communities**

Different trading systems have obviously existed for centuries. After World War II, a few Christian organizations began what was called 'alternative trade', or 'fair trade', with artisan work from the Middle East. In 1986, coffee became a part of the Fair Trade movement when Equal Exchange began in Boston as a 100% fair trade coffee business, to show that a business can survive when it pays a good price to the producers. Now there are many fair trade coffee companies throughout the US who have joined the Fair Trade Federation, following the seven fair trade principles: fair wages, cooperatives not individuals, consumer education, environmental sustainability, financial & technical support, respect for cultural identity, and public accountability.

What do the coffee cooperatives get? Most cooperatives sell what they can in the fair trade system -- @ \$1.26 a pound, \$1.41 for certified organic -- and sell the rest on the world commodities market at around half of that. In the fair trade system, about a dollar per pound goes to each farmer. The extra 26 cents goes to the cooperative. They decide together each year how to spend this, depending on what is most needed. They have bought trucks, and built storage barns and health clinics. The farmers may put cement floors rather than dirt floors in their homes. They get to keep their small farms. They can support their families. They struggle with whether their children will continue on the farm. They don't achieve an easy life, but they achieve hope and dignity.

Less than 1% of the world's coffee is sold in the fair trade system, because the demand for it is still low. But you won't hear a fair trade farmer say that that 1% of the market isn't worth the effort. You will hear a dignified humble person talk with pride about their farm, quality of coffee, family, new community clinic, or truck.

Most fair trade coffee cooperatives are moving toward organic certification, which eliminates the pesticide use, reduces erosion on the mountainsides, and keeps the water cleaner. S-O-FT coffee: shade grown, organic, fair trade, is coffee that protects rainforests and local waters, and the farmers' health and livelihood. S-O-FT coffee is an antidote to a harsh world of commerce.

### **A Story from Maya Vinic Cooperative, Chiapas Mexico**

In October of 2004, two coffee farmers from the Maya Vinic cooperative in Chiapas Mexico toured the U.S. Midwest to talk about their experiences. Jose Perez Vazquez, president of the civil Society Las Abejas, and Macario Arias Gomez, the president of the Maya Vinic cooperative, spoke in Grand Rapids to over 80 people gathered over a dessert of S-O-FT coffee

and Mexican pastries. Dressed in traditional Mayan beribboned hats and white tunics, they told of their struggles. In 1997 their small mountain community, Acteal, was attacked while they were at mass in their small wooden church. 47 people were killed, including two pregnant women. As they struggled to recover, they wondered together how to forgive their neighbors who were part of the massacre. They decided to form a coffee cooperative as part of their nonviolent response. Today, their cooperative, Maya Vinic, sells all their coffee on the fair trade market, a rare achievement.

### **Exploring God's Economy with Coffee**

Buying S-O-FT coffee is an easy way to invest a life-giving, not life-destroying, economic system.

Here are some creative things congregations can do to promote S-O-FT coffee:

- Invest hospitality money in S-O-FT coffee for coffee hour. Some congregations have a cup for extra donations to make up the price difference.
- Sell to congregants to take home.
- Sell it as a fund-raiser.
- Meet the farmers; take mission trips with a fair trade coffee delegation; host a conference with your local Fair Trade retailers.
- Begin a Fair Trade store in your community.
- Join the Equal Exchange Interfaith Program. Several denominations have joined – check to see if yours is one.
- Give S-O-FT coffee as gifts, at family reunions, and so on.
- Ask local coffee retailers to carry S-O-FT coffee. Consumer demand is powerful.

### **For More Information**

Two especially good 100% fair trade coffee companies are Equal Exchange and Higher Grounds Trading Company of Leland, Michigan. Birding organizations and the Smithsonian also have excellent information on their websites. Check your denomination's web site too; many have information affiliating with Equal Exchange.

American Birding Assn	<a href="http://www.americanbirding.org">www.americanbirding.org</a> (“Conservation programs”)
Cooperative Coffees	<a href="http://www.cooperativecoffees.com">www.cooperativecoffees.com</a>
Equal Exchange	<a href="http://www.equalexchange.com">www.equalexchange.com</a>
Fair Trade Federation	<a href="http://www.fairtradefederation.com/">www.fairtradefederation.com/</a>
Higher Grounds Trading Co.	<a href="http://www.javaforjustice.com">www.javaforjustice.com</a>
Maya Vinic Coffee Cooperative	<a href="http://www.cooperativecoffees.com/producers/mexico/mayavinic.html">http://www.cooperativecoffees.com/producers/mexico/mayavinic.html</a>
Smithsonian Institute	<a href="http://www.si.edu/smbc">www.si.edu/smbc</a>

Your congregation can participate in a life-giving economic structure without too much effort or extra expense. Here's to coffee justice in God's economy!