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On the Frontlines

Faith in Fair Trade

How Lutherans are transforming their love of coffee into global good

By Kathryn Wolford & Lisa Bonds

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Faith in Fair Trade

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The idea took shape around a coffee pot. Lutheran World Relief (LWR) had recently begun purchasing Fair Trade coffee – grown by cooperatives of small-scale farmers that are guaranteed a fair price for their crops and access to affordable credit – for use in the office. We were hearing more and more stories about how the crash in coffee prices around the world was devastating small-scale producers. Staff felt good about using a product that paid a fair price to the population that was the focus of our overseas mission – namely, small rural producers trying to survive in and adapt to an increasingly global marketplace.

If we felt so good about drinking Fair Trade coffee, we wondered aloud, “Would our constituency of Lutherans in the U.S. get the same buzz?” Instead of giving emergency aid to farmers displaced by low coffee prices, could we increase the amount of fairly traded coffee purchased in the United States? After all, Lutherans are famous for their love of coffee.

This market-based solution would be not only more sustainable, but also more just, in that it would pay farmers fairly for their hard work.

LWR’s mission is to promote economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable rural communities in highly impoverished areas around the globe. We do most of our program work within the affected communities. But in this case, we recognized untapped potential right here at home.

Traditionally, most international organizations see their supporters as financial donors ... full stop. What if we could tap into Lutherans’ values and help them put their faith into daily action through their purchasing power as consumers?

Tons of Good

When we began to promote the purchase of Fair Trade coffee to Lutheran congregations back in 1996, the Fair Trade movement was still virtually unknown in the U.S. marketplace. LWR used our brand equity – our credibility, combined with our direct connection to rural producers – to launch a national campaign with Lutheran congregations.

For the LWR Coffee Project, we partnered with Equal Exchange, which buys Fair Trade Certified coffee directly from small-scale farmer cooperatives around the world, and then roasts and packages the product for distribution in the

United States. We package Equal Exchange coffee under our distinct LWR brand and sell it to Lutheran congregations. We also educate Lutherans about the benefits of Fair Trade.

Through this 10-year partnership, Lutherans have purchased more than 400 tons of Fair Trade coffee. In one year alone, we exceeded our goal of doubling LWR Coffee Project sales from a baseline of 45 tons of Fair Trade coffee to 90 tons. This year, two years after that 90-Ton Challenge, the total hit 150 tons.

More than 5,000 congregations participate in a variety of ways, including serving coffee from the LWR Coffee Project after worship, giving it as gifts to visitors, conducting education forums on global trade and development issues, and urging local stores to carry Fair Trade coffee. Due in part to the success of the project, we expanded our Fair Trade offerings to include chocolate and handicrafts, and we have been successful in marketing those products to our constituents as well.

The success of this campaign confirms that many people are thirsty for ways to translate their faith into action on issues such as fair trade and poverty eradication. But they need trusted sources to help them navigate the complex and often confusing world of corporate social responsibility.

Lutherans respond to LWR’s call to purchase fairly traded coffee



KATHRYN WOLFORD (left) is the former president of Lutheran World Relief. She led the organization from 1993 to 2006.

LISA BONDS (right) is LWR’s vice president for external relations.



Nicaraguan farmers sort coffee beans. Fair Trade raises farmers' incomes, helping them afford healthcare, clothing, and education.

because they trust us, and because we share stories about real people whose lives have changed because of Fair Trade. Through print resources, videos, and presentations, we show them how their Fair Trade purchases help people keep their farms, as well as earn money to feed and clothe their families, send their children to school, and access healthcare. We even host study visits to coffee-growing regions.

What's more, the LWR Coffee Project has become an entry point for teaching Lutherans about other justice and trade issues. Had we begun by discussing the complexities of the World Trade Organization and bilateral trade agreements, we wouldn't have gotten very far. But by meeting people where they are, and showing them what a difference they can make in someone's life with as simple an act as buying fairly traded coffee, we pique people's interest. Many of the people who first learned about Fair Trade through the LWR Coffee Project have become energetic advocates, encouraging their local stores to carry fairly traded products, and even writing to their legislators about global trade issues.

Keeping the Faith

The very success of LWR and other organizations in taking Fair Trade to the mainstream has led to a new

problem: How do we ensure that Fair Trade certification is not dumbed down to meet increasing demand? The Fair Trade movement was established so that cooperatives of small-scale farmers – a traditionally marginalized group – would have negotiating power in the global marketplace.

But now more consumers want

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to feel good about their purchases, and more corporations want to include Fair Trade items in their lists of products. And so major companies such as Nestlé, McDonald's, and even Wal-Mart are offering Fair Trade Certified coffee (see related article on p. 64). Although on the surface this seems like a positive development – bringing Fair Trade to the

masses – we wonder: Are these companies truly committed to socially responsible practices, or is it mere “greenwashing”?

The involvement of major corporations also creates new dilemmas for the Fair Trade movement as a whole. When the Fair Trade certifying organization gets a significant portion of its income from large companies, will it apply the same standards to everyone? How will the certifying organization make sure that large corporations follow through on their commitments to small farmers? Can Fair Trade help low-wage workers on large plantations, where they have no ownership in the company, in the same way that it has helped small-scale farmers in cooperatives, where they have a voice? Will multinational corporations, which are in large part responsible for many of the injustices in the current trade system, damage the Fair Trade movement's image and credibility as they become a part of that movement?

These are a few of the questions that will define the Fair Trade movement's future. LWR and other non-profits involved in the movement will continue to push for consistent and high standards for the Fair Trade label, so that Fair Trade can continue to be both a reliable guarantee for consumers and a powerful tool for social and economic empowerment among some of the world's poorest farmers.

The issues surrounding global trade are complex, and the answers are not always crystal clear. But supporting the Fair Trade movement is one way to make a real difference in the lives of people we may never meet. For people of faith, it is an important way to live our values through the choices we make in our daily lives. □