

Chiapas Fair Trade Coffee Trip with Witness for Peace

It all began with a cup of coffee—and one simple question. From this one cup of coffee how much does the grower receive? What does the actual producer receive for growing and tending the trees, for harvesting the crop, for processing the coffee cherries to beans, and for getting these beans to market? I was shocked to learn that on the average, only 11 cents of the coffee dollar makes its way back to the grower. The lack of marketing ability, poor infrastructure, the fluctuating price of coffee on the world market, and centuries of economic repression all add to the woes of the small, independent grower.

Having been on a similar delegation to El Salvador a few years ago, I wanted to compare the coffee growing regions, observe the life style, and see for myself the effect of Fair Trade among the indigenous people of southern Mexico. Our delegation had 19 members, and we had nine days of intensely scheduled activities. As a group we visited with coffee growers and leaders of co-operatives, with spokespersons of social development agencies, political organizations, and church representatives.



<http://www.clevelandspace.org/flyers/franzi.pdf>

Chiapas is a state that has a very multiethnic and multicultural population. Between 24 and 32% of the population (from about 980,000 to 1,220,000 people) belong to an indigenous group. It is also an area of Mexico that experiences some of the highest poverty rates in the entire country. This region is also very rich in natural resources and biodiversity. The highlands of Chiapas are the home to some of the very best coffee produced in the world.

Our home base during the trip was in the city of San Cristobal de las Casas. From San Cristobal we ventured out to many of the surrounding areas for our meetings. Among our excursions was a visit to CIRSA, the coffee co-operative in Simojovel. There we learned first hand the impact of Fair Trade pricing of coffee as it involved the small farmer producers. It was not until 1987-1988 that the actual coffee producers, the small farmers, started to organize as to where and how to sell their coffee. Before this time there was nowhere to sell their product, except to the coyotes, which consistently paid them a very low price. At the present time the growers bring their coffee to CIRSA from the many remote areas where they live, and the co-operative pays them a fair price for their coffee beans. Equal Exchange works directly with the co-operative as well as some Fair Trade European companies.



<http://www.equalexchange.coop/interfaith-delegation-to-chiapas-mexico>

Many may ask if Fair Trade and co-operatives are really helping the poor of the world that produce so much for us in the United States. The answer is YES, but this is only one part of the economic puzzle. The people that I met are still living in extreme poverty, and many are trying to survive on less than \$2US per day. As consumers we must be aware of where our products come from and corporate policies toward all workers. We must question whether people are being treated with human dignity and being paid a fair and living wage. People need to be treated as people. Consumers need to stand in solidarity behind these producers. Purchasing products from Equal Exchange and other Fair Trade companies is a beginning in the struggle to attain economic equality. The consumer can also make an effort to shop at retail establishments that support Fair Trade companies. In the

Cleveland area, they tend to be the smaller family owned businesses such as Heinen's and Zagara's. Revive and Ten Thousand Villages are also 100% Fair Trade Stores in the Cleveland area. Consumers have the power to change the current economic system.

The Tsotsil Indians of Chiapas would say "Colobal" to all of you that support Fair Trade. That is their only way to say "Thank You."

Rita (Henninger) Danks '75

At the end of January 2009 Rita (Henninger) Danks, 1975 John Carroll alum, traveled with Witness for Peace, United Church of Christ Jubilee Justice Task Force, Church of the Brethren, and Equal Exchange to Chiapas Mexico to learn first-hand about the business of Fair Trade coffee in this isolated region of Mexico. She has written this concise summary to highlight some of her observations.

If you would like more information or would like Rita to do a presentation for you, contact her at 440-256-0423 or e-mail at danks12@msn.com.