CRISIS IN OUR CUP OF COFFEE

Report on my participation in a Witness for Peace Delegation to Chiapas

Rev. Alfonso A. Román, March 10, 2007

Introduction
From January 20-28 and thanks to the generosity of UCC Justice and Witness and the Council for Hispanic Ministries I had the opportunity to participate in a week-long visit to southern Mexico to learn more about Fair Trade and the lives of small-scale coffee farmers. Traveling with a delegation organized by the United Church of Christ Jubilee Justice Taskforce, Witness for Peace, and Equal Exchange, a Fair Trade Organization that imports coffee, tea and cocoa, we met with cooperative and church leaders, participated in the coffee harvest at a local cooperative, and stayed two whole days in the home of a coffee-grower’s family in Chavajeval – a Zapatista’s integrated rural community. That particular visit was a profound and heartening experience, especially, when most of us slept on dirt floors and had “tortillas” y “frijoles” for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Fortunately, it was always served with an aromatic and delicious cup of Chiapas organic coffee.

A Cup of Coffee Crisis
I was very impressed by how strenuous and difficult is the coffee cultivation process, the living conditions still faced by the members of the local coffee-growers cooperative, and the meager profit Chiapans make compared to the millions dollars that flow from the small growers’ efforts to the “Big Four” transnationals such as Nestle – Switzerland; Nescafe, Procter & Gamble – U.S.; Folgers, Kraft Foods Inc – U.S.; and Maxwell House, Sara Lee – U.S. We must not forget to mention Starbucks, a new sophisticated player in the worldwide coffee-consumption market.

Coffee is a vital source of income for hundreds of thousands of small-scale farmers and their families in some of the poorest countries in the world. Mexico is the world’s fifth largest coffee producing country and its economy has relied heavily on coffee exports. One third of Mexico’s production is grown in the state of Chiapas. Coffee growing communities have been devastated as the world market prices for coffee collapsed from $1.40 per pound in 1999 to just 45¢ in the summer of 2001. Prices have gained some ground in the past two years, but years of low prices have caused massive disruption in farming communities. As a consequence, rural incomes have plummeted, thousands of jobs have been lost and many people are migrating into cities or even to the U.S. for work. It is estimated that 30,000 people leave the region each year for the United States. By the end of 2004, there were some 300,000 Chiapans living in the U.S., 65 percent of whom are farmers and indigenous people. They are living in very precarious situations in new destinations like Georgia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas—until recently, areas that had never seen so many Mexican faces.

Learning process
To help us understand Chiapas’ history and economic reality, the coffee production crisis, and the reasons behind Chiapans’ forced immigration, we were hosted by the following organizations: Center for Economic and Political Research and Community Action (CIEPAC), International Service for Peace (SiPaz), Comunidades Indígenas de la Región de Simojovel de Allende Coffee Cooperative (CIRSA), Women Weaving Cooperative (OMIRSI). We also participated in a market-field trip in San Cristóbal to compare the “canasta básica” cost. We visited a huge shopping mall, a family front door groceries store, and a typical “Mercado Central”. We learned about the incongruence between the income and the expenses the Chiapans are confronted with.

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Commitment and Hope

As part of the experience each one of the participants was required to complete certain actions as a back-home commitment to what we learned. My commitments were:

1. In the next two months (February, March 2007), I’ll be consulting with Agricultural Missions, Inc. and the UCC Council of Hispanic Ministries to connect them with these efforts.

2. During the next 5 months (February-June), I will explore possibilities of connecting Puerto Rico Amnesty International with CIEPAC.

3. By March 1, 2007, I will pursue the publication of an article in a nationalistic newspaper about the experience.

4. By the third Thursday of February, I will participate in an interview at the University of Puerto Rico Radio Station.

This report is my first step in trying to accomplish the first commitment. My hope is that eventually CHM’s Regions incorporate in their Strategic Plan the following goals related to the reality this experience demonstrated.

1. To ensure that UCC Conferences/Associations promote Equal Exchange, a worker-owned cooperative and Fair Trade organization founded to create a more equitable model of trade with small-scale farmers, such as those connected to CIRSA’s farmers we visited.

By trading directly with farmer co-ops, Equal Exchange cuts out layers of middlemen, ensuring that more money reaches the people who do the hard work of growing and harvesting coffee. Equal Exchange pays farmers a fair price, including a guaranteed minimum of $1.41 per pound of organic coffee.

3. To encourage Justice and Witness to make ministry to immigrants from Chiapas a mission priority and implement collaborative justice efforts with Southeast, Southern and South Central UCC Conferences.