

# THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE DIALOGUE

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Reverend Ledyard Baxter, Pastor - Edited by Hank Boerner  
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## COFFEE...OUR EVERYDAY BEVERAGE -- BECOMING SYMBOL OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE...OR INJUSTICE

We are a nation of coffee drinkers; often, the most relaxing or enjoyable of our get-togethers are “over a cup of coffee” – think of our church coffee hour following morning worship service, or coffee served at home when we entertain family and friends. Do we take for granted the production of that little package of coffee that we break open to brew? (For most of us, the answer is “yes.” We give little thought to the growing and harvesting of coffee beans, for example.)

And yet, coffee could soon become the litmus test for many of us in terms of “exercising” our personal sense of social responsibility, and economic and social justice.

The coffee we serve all starts with the bean, grown and harvested by small farmers in such lands as Mexico, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Brazil, Viet Nam, Kenya, and Ethiopia (the original ancient home of the wondrous bean). Much of the bean growing is by family farmers, with the entire family (including young children) involved in the process. In some cases, families are divided, with the men coming to the United States to attempt to earn money to send home while the family continues to farm the family plot.

We actually have a global coffee glut: From 1999 to 2002, the price of coffee in world markets dropped by half, most directly affecting the estimated 25 million small farmers, and as author **Katherine Ellison** writes in the June issue of *Smithsonian Magazine*, “*throwing millions out of work and off their land and leaving families impoverished and malnourished...*”

Is there some way we can help? Yes! The coffee that we consume at home, in the office, at coffee shops and here in Old Steeple Church starts with small farmers planting and harvesting their beans under various conditions, but

mostly in shade, in rich soils, at certain latitudes (usually near the Equator), and most often, in sensitive areas such as rain forests (to shade the plants). Our choice of “which coffee” could become an important decision with long-term consequences.

A number of social concerns come together in coffee issues: The local working conditions for the family farmers; assuring preservation of remaining rain forests; preventing over use of chemical fertilizers; addressing low wages paid to workers; improving the level of payments to farmers for their crops. (Today, the global market for coffee beans is about \$1.25 per pound to producers; Fair Trade buyers pay about \$1.40 per pound to farmers.)

Two answers for those who ask themselves, “*What can I do?*” One is to seek out organically grown coffee (chemical-free); the second, to purchase “Fair Trade” coffee. Neither solution is total in addressing troubling issues such as farmer payments, or without controversy. “Fair Trade” coffee is usually (also) organic, but costs more at retail. Overall, less than one-half of one percent of the \$18 billion US retail coffee market is “Fair Trade” – but every journey toward real social and economic justice begins with tiny steps, and many such steps are being taken today by socially-conscious consumers willing to spend a little bit more for their coffee.

*Continued on Page 2*

*Coffee...Our Everyday Beverage...  
Becoming Symbol of Economic Justice ...  
or Injustice (continued)*

Several American retailers offer consumers Fair Trade coffee. **Proctor and Gamble** sells Fair Trade coffee at wholesale through its **Millstone** brand division. Well-known **Starbucks** sells very small quantities in some local stores. **Dunkin Donuts** is introducing Fair Trade espresso in 3,000+ stores this year. One of the most actively promoted Fair Trade brands is **Green Mountain Roasters**, offered by a Vermont-based company that has organized "Stewardship" coffee growing cooperatives in Mexico, Costa Rica, Peru, Guatemala, Sumatra, and Hawaii.

The **Justice and Witness Ministries of United Church of Christ (UCC)** has formed a partnership with "**Equal Exchange Interfaith Program**," another fair trade organization to purchase "fairly-traded," shade-grown, gourmet coffee for serving during fellowship hours at local UCC churches. (A payment goes to UCC's Small Farmer Fund to support small agricultural communities for every pound of coffee, tea and cocoa purchased by UCC congregations such as ours.) There is quite a bit of information on the UCC Web site about these programs.

This morning, we are serving Green Mountain coffee at our social hour. *It's a small start!*

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

[www.gmcr.com](http://www.gmcr.com)

(or)

[www.greenmountaincoffee.com](http://www.greenmountaincoffee.com)

(for information about Green Mountain Coffee;  
see bottom of Home Page for  
Social and Environmental Responsibility pages)

[www.ucc.org/justice/index.html](http://www.ucc.org/justice/index.html)

(for information about United Church of Christ  
social justice missions and activities)  
(See Justice and Witness Ministries link  
with the Web site)

(Type in "Coffee" in the Search function  
and find information about local activities)

This information is provided by  
Old Steeple Community Church of Aquebogue, New York  
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on Long Island's North Fork.

The dialogue is intended to help further understanding  
of current events and trends in social and economic justice,  
and in corporate social responsibility.

**Reverend Ledyard Baxter**, Pastor  
Church Office 631.722.3070

**Hank Boerner**, Dialogue Editor  
Telephone 516.248.2383  
Email: [hank@hankboerner.com](mailto:hank@hankboerner.com)