FAIR TRADE COFFEE

In recent months alarming reports have been circulating about the global glut in the coffee market and its effect on more than 25 million coffee farmers, their families, and their communities. Co-op America Quarterly (Spring 2003) reports that 600,000 coffee farmers and workers have lost their jobs in Central America; 700,000 families in Ethiopia face economic instability complicated by the HIV/AIDS crisis; in many places prices have fallen so low that the farmers cannot feed and care for their children adequately; in some cases sales do not even cover the cost of production. At the same time major companies and investors are enjoying windfall profits. “Under conventional trade, the race for profit drives companies to minimize their costs by exploiting workers and the environment in developing countries.” (14)

“Fair trade is based on the principle of putting workers and the environment first, while still working in a healthy business model. Businesses committed to fair trade agree to adhere to the following criteria in their relationships with farmers and workers:

- Cooperative and healthy workplaces
- A fair and living wage
- Environmental sustainability
- Consumer education and public disclosure
- Respect for cultural identity. (14)

“Fair trade guarantees farmers a fair wage for their labor, lifts them out of poverty, and puts farmers on the road to self-determination. Fair trade is bringing hope and justice to coffee farmers throughout the world.” (16) We the consumers can play a major role in this growing movement, which reaches out not only to coffee farmers but also to other workers in similar circumstances. Co-op America lists five fast ways to act:

- Buy fair trade products.
- Encourage fair trade business practices.
- Educate others.
- Invest in fair trade businesses.
- Join campaigns.

Many of us have been deeply concerned about the enormous inequalities in our world and our seeming powerlessness compared with the corporations that dominate trade. The fair trade movement brings the realities of global economics right down to where we live, what we buy, eat, and wear, how we practice our faith. Some faith communities begin simply by serving and selling fair trade coffee after worship and at other meetings, making available information about the movement and inviting friends to consider this option for themselves. They in turn can pass the word along to others, and some may take steps that will affect businesses, investments, and the environment as well as workers. By 2001 there were 7000 retail outlets selling fair trade goods in the US and Canada, an increase of 271% in just one year. The Fair Trade Federation estimates that worldwide sales of fair trade goods have reached $500 million already. Safeway, Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s, and Starbucks now carry fair trade coffee—but it must be requested. To find fair trade coffee, chocolate, tea, crafts, jewelry, etc. see Co-op America’s National Green Pages (www.greenpages.org) or TransFair USA (www.transfairusa.org/do/whereToBuy).

Consider the ways in which your family and faith community are already participating in the fair trade movement and additional steps you may wish to take with them.