

The “Why” and the “What” behind the Fair Trade Ministry of Westminster

By Jane Shirley, Earth Stewardship Ministry Team

One of my favorite Old Testament verses is Micah 6:8, What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. I hope to illustrate here how Fair Trade is a way of acting justly.

To begin, let's look at the centuries old character, Israel's King Ahab. Remember him? He was Elijah's nemesis and the husband of Jezebel, the queen of mean. They both had severe cases of affluenza. Near their palace was the vineyard of a small farmer named Naboth. The vineyard had been in his family for generations; that's how long it takes to establish a good vineyard. Ahab really wanted that land, and asked Naboth to sell it to him so he could clear-cut it and plant vegetables. Naboth said no, so the Royals devised a plot to have him killed so they could take over the land. Justice did not prevail.

In the 21st century, stories with similar plots play out in various parts of the world. In the Amazon Basin, state of Para, Brazil, Sister Dorothy Stang, who was born and raised here in Dayton, worked with indigenous peasant farmers for some 30 years. As their advocate, she organized the small forest farmers into cooperatives that enabled them to sell their produce to markets around the world at a fair price that gave them a means to live. She also sought to protect these peasant farmers from criminal gangs that were hired by the corporate factory farmers whose goal it was to take over the small farms, clear-cut the jungle, and drive out the native peoples. In February 2005, the Ahabs of the Amazon Basin thought they had won when they martyred Sister Dorothy.

But the spirit of Sister Dorothy lives on in the many fair trade advocates sponsored by a wide variety of faith communities who

continue working with small farmers and growers in numerous parts of the world, helping them grow quality crops using ages-old methods that preserve the environment, and that do not contaminate the produce with neurotoxins found in food products grown on factory farms that incorporate chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and fungicides. By preserving the forest farms, the indigenous peoples are given a means of survival; this is economic and social justice for the poor. Environmental justice is served by preserving the endangered rainforests where coffee, nuts, and other products are grown in the shade, as nature intended.

Sister Dorothy said, “The farmers who live without protection in the forest have the sacrosanct right to aspire to a better life on the land where they can live and work with dignity while respecting the environment. The death of the forest is the end of our life.”

I invite you to take a stand for social, economic, and environmental justice by choosing fair trade products whenever possible. Some are available in local grocery stores. And we on your Earth Stewardship Ministry Team make it easy for you by offering fair trade coffees, teas, chocolate, and nuts for sale the first Sunday of each month during coffee hour. We hope to see you on the First Sunday of every month in Fellowship Hall.