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Crossing borders: Just coffee, just wages

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CROSSING BORDERS: JUST COFFEE, JUST WAGES

IF YOU STAND IN THE RIGHT PLACE in Agua Prieta, Sonora, you’ll have one foot in Mexico and the other in Arizona. And you’ll be standing on a major border crossing point for migrants.

It’s also where Mark Adams ‘93 has worked and lived for the last 15 years as U.S. coordinator of Frontera de Cristo, a Presbyterian border ministry that offers healthcare, counseling, drug rehabilitation and other support to local residents. It serves as a point of light as to how members of a border community can come together and, in a small but telling way, develop a model for addressing the issue of immigration.

Through Café Justo (Just Coffee), a coffee-growing-and-selling co-operative, Adams and friends Tommy Bassett and Daniel Cifuentes have helped Mexican farmers establish a business that allows them to remain in their homes, work their land, process their product and provide for their families. The three men further model how disparate people can find common ground and cooperate to promote the larger good.

There’s the soft-spoken Presbyterian minister (Adams), the not so ministerial businessman (Bassett, who has described himself as a “recovering hippie industrialist”), and Cifuentes, a displaced coffee grower from southern Mexico.

Adams says the co-op idea began percolating in the late 1990s. Because of the decline of corn and coffee prices in Chiapas, a state in southern Mexico, migrants were heading north to the factories of Agua Prieta, or continuing across the border to find work in the States.

Eduardo Perez Verdugo was one of those migrants, but after being caught, roughed up and sent back to Mexico, he wound up seeking help from Cifuentes and Adams. During their conversations, Adams says, Verdugo pointed out that if the farmers could have more control over the production and sale of their coffee, their profits would be higher and they would have less reason to migrate.

Cifuentes and Adams saw possibilities in Verdugo’s idea but realized they needed someone with business experience to help put it into play. Enter Bassett, who had lived in the area since the early 1990s. Together the trio developed a plan, and in 2002 Frontera de Cristo provided a $20,000 loan to launch the co-op.

Here’s how the steadily growing business works: Coffee farmers (the co-op now includes more than 100 families) in Mexico pick, process and store their beans, then ship them to Agua Prieta, where they are roasted, ground, bagged and packed. Fresh from the roaster they go to UPS trucks, which take their Fair Trade blends throughout the States for sale and distribution. The growers control all aspects of the business, which means no middlemen, more jobs, higher profit margins, larger incomes and more stable family lives.

According to the Arizona Daily Star, sales of Café Justo surpass 50,000 pounds a year. Says Adams, “Tommy has now started his own business, supported by Frontera, to focus on increasing sales outside of the area.” One spot that Adams cites as a big supporter: Trinity Presbyterian Church in Travelers Rest, S.C.

Adams and Bassett have even written a book about the project, Just Coffee: Caffeine with a Conscience was published in 2009.

A native of small-town Clover, S.C., Adams majored in history at Furman and initially intended to teach. But for years, he says, he had grappled with such issues as how faith and life intersect, and with the inequalities in economics, race and class.

Because of a scheduling quirk he did his student teaching in the fall of 1993. He didn’t want to take a teaching job in the middle of the year, and since the church he served as a youth director in college had a relationship with Amistad, a sister ministry of Frontera de Cristo on the Texas Coahuila border, he went there for six months. “From that experience,” he says, “the scriptures came alive. I felt I would be back someday.”

After teaching for a year, he enrolled at Columbia Theological Seminary and earned a divinity degree. Right out of seminary, a position opened up with Frontera. “It was meant to be,” he says. He’s been there ever since.

His work has not gone unrecognized. A few years ago the seminary presented him its Pioneer in Ministry Award. During the 2013 spring semester, he was invited back to Furman by the Center for Vocational Reflection to visit with students and to deliver the Ed and Peggy Good Lecture on the topic “The Spiritual Discipline of Crossing Borders.”

Adams says, “We share life and ministry with our sisters and brothers in Mexico. We don’t do anything alone. Where we have the most impact is working across borders, whether religious, economic or political, and partnering with others. Our focus is on relationships — building bridges, sharing talents and gifts.”

One such gift is Café Justo, which in its own specific way helps combat the problem of illegal immigration. At least in Adams’ corner of the world, such a simple thing as a cup of coffee can make a big difference.

— JIM STEWART

Learn more at cafejusto.org and fronteradecristo.org.