

# Shopping for Justice

Where Justice, Faith and Your Wallet Meet

BY ALEXA SMITH

Ask Judy Hoffhine, a pastor in Columbus, Ohio, what the Bible says about how faithful people both earn money and use it, and she'll tell you it is a hard word.

In *Isaiah 58:3* we hear Isaiah shout, "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers," as he rages against the unjust economics of the Hebrew people. Even then, people apparently cared first for themselves and, then, the rest of the world.

It's a warning that Jeremiah hurls, too. "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages . . ." (*Jeremiah 22:13*).

"I think the biblical challenge to how we use our money is hard to hear," says Judy, who talks with many Christians in the United States who feel paralyzed by guilt once they realize that how they shop impacts workers in less affluent countries, or rather, completely impoverished

countries, who stay completely impoverished because they don't receive fair wages for hard work.

The next step, she says, is finding ways to spend differently.

## A Mandate for Justice

That process is one of the reasons she co-authored a Bible study, *Fair Trade: Using Our Purchasing Power for Justice and Hope*, with Ruth Farrell, a former Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission coworker in Peru, who spent nine years developing a fair trade corridor between remote communities in the Andes Mountains and the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy in St. Louis, Missouri.

"God has a clear vision of how life should be. That's articulated especially well in *Isaiah 65:17-25*," says Judy, citing a well-known text about how—in God's new creation—people shall not labor in vain, but shall lay claim to land and farm it, and not fall victim to despair or distress.

"The Bible is quite clear. This is not proof-texting, picking passages

to suit your argument . . ." adds Judy. "The *Torah*, the *Psalms*, the prophets, the Gospels, the Letters—they all speak to the intent of Yahweh and Jesus Christ to bring justice to all people."

Judy and Ruth also serve on the board of directors for Partners for Just Trade (PJT), a nonprofit, Christian organization that builds partnerships between conscientious consumers and artisans living in extreme poverty. The board and PJT's executive director, Carrie Hawthorne, guide the organization toward the environmentally-savvy, justice-minded internet shopper who wants to purchase quality products at a fair price—and who are ethically committed to doing so.

With more than 200 artisans and 20 groups in its portfolio, Partners for Just Trade (PJT) is now a full-blown, national marketing operation that turned over \$130,000 in sales last year. It is a member of both the Fair Trade Federation and Co-op America's Green Business network, organizations that screen members to verify that they are indeed committed to fair trade and to green business practices.

The women all agree that PJT isn't just a marketing operation, although increasing sales is certainly critical to the survival of the organization and the artisans who market through its channels. PJT's mission is as much education as marketing.

## Fair Wages, New Skills

More than 75 percent of the artisans who market through PJT are women whose husbands and fathers earn only a pittance doing irregular day-jobs. Every artisan lives *way* below the poverty line. With a master's degree in business, that reality hit Ruth hard in Peru.

She saw companies prey on Peruvian knitters, for instance, who make Christmas stockings and children's

toys. “They’d pay them whatever they wanted to pay . . . despite hours put into the product,” Ruth says, adding that, if a knitter fusses about her salary, there are thousands of others desperate for cash who won’t complain. “Even worse, companies might sponsor a competition among the women to see their best products, then take the idea and have it made elsewhere.”

Fair trade is different from micro-enterprise. With fair trade, the artisans are taught the skills they need to run their own successful businesses. “All of the artisan groups with PJT work in cooperatives,” says Ruth, which means that exploitation is less likely, though a small business owner financed with micro-credit can still underpay workers.

“There is so much more power to change a neighborhood of marginalized people (when they’re working in groups),” Ruth says.

Carrie spent one month in Peru training artisans to design products, set prices and approach new markets. She says the co-op model PJT adopted helps women accommodate work to their lives, allowing them to break to prepare meals or to care for children. “In a male-dominated society like Peru, women usually are not given the chance to work, and therefore, to excel, because they are expected to tend the house and the family. By working in a fair trade cooperative, they learn things they’d never otherwise learn. Doors open to opportunities they’d never have otherwise.

“This is true for women, especially women,” Carrie says.

## Supporting Artisans, Empowering Yourself

“We aren’t interested in getting people to buy as a charity gift,” says Ruth, who spent years tramping

### Here’s What You Can Do

- ✓ Purchase fair trade items from Partners for Just Trade. Visit [www.partnersforjusttrade.org](http://www.partnersforjusttrade.org).
- ✓ Host a partnership sale at your next church or PW meeting. In addition to supporting the artisans, the profits you make can be donated to a project of your choice. Visit [www.partnersforjusttrade.org](http://www.partnersforjusttrade.org) or call 314/773-7358 for more information.
- ✓ Participate in the Trade Week of Action, October 12–19, 2008. Organize a worship service that lifts up trade issues, a fast followed by a fellowship meal or a display about fair trade. Visit [www.tradeweek.org](http://www.tradeweek.org) for more information.

through the Andes to advise knitters, weavers, sewers, jewelry-makers and potters what is sellable, what is not, and how to price goods for the international market. “We don’t want people to buy just because they want to help. Charity isn’t sustainable.”

Carrie wants to see U.S. buyers turn to fair trade for ordinary, everyday goods. “A lot of fair trade products can be viewed simply as gift items. But a lot of the items are quite practical. There are socks, scarves, kids’ backpacks.” She would

like to see fair trade sheets, dishes, soaps and other items needed for daily living on the shelves of U.S. retail stores, too.

“People only buy once. They won’t keep doing so,” Ruth says, stressing that products have to be attractive to buyers, period. “We’re not about increasing materialism.”

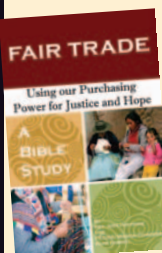
“People are disgusted by the way big corporations do business,” Judy comments, reflecting on many U.S. Christians who feel trapped in a global economy that puts corporate bottom lines first and people second or third or fourth. She was one of several teachers who ran pilot projects for the fair trade Bible study in U.S. congregations. Participants are energized, she says, by linking the biblical mandate for fair treatment for the poor with where and how they shop.

Being an informed consumer helps, she says. Going to farmers’ markets, shopping online for fair trade items or going a little out of the way in order to buy fair trade also will help. These are ways of overcoming helplessness and taking back power. 🍒

Alexa Smith is associate for Joining Hands Against Hunger and is a member of the Partners for Just Trade board of directors.



### Resources



#### Fair Trade: Using Our Purchasing Power for Justice and Hope

A Bible study that also includes personal narratives, questions for discussion or reflection, suggested actions and a list of resources for additional study

Order by calling 314/773-7358 or visiting [www.partnersforjusttrade.org/bible](http://www.partnersforjusttrade.org/bible). \$5.00 each plus shipping; 10 or more copies, \$3.00 each. A sample lesson is available at [www.partnersforjusttrade.org/bible](http://www.partnersforjusttrade.org/bible).

A DVD on fair trade will be available in October 2008, and can be used to accompany the study.