



# New life at the border

Just Coffee offers Mexican families a way out of poverty—without crossing the border.

By Parrish Jones

**A**fter years of counseling young, impoverished and desperate Mexicans not to try to cross into the United States, leaders of a Presbyterian ministry along the Arizona/Mexico border had a moment of vision.

Since becoming co-director of the Frontera de Cristo border ministry in 2000, Presbyterian mission worker Mark Adams had met growing numbers of men and women who had fled the southern Mexico state of Chiapas. Many of them were farmers who could no longer earn a living because of plummeting corn and coffee prices. They came to look for work along the border, hoping to send money back to their families. He and Jesus Gallegos, the ministry's Mexican co-director at the time, sat down one evening with a group of migrants, many of whom had been attending Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church in Agua Prieta, Mexico.

"What can we do if we do not cross the border?" one of the migrants asked in frustration. Adams

responded, "Let's talk about it."

And talk they did. What could they do to help their families stay in Chiapas? What could end the push of poverty? The answers were elusive.

"What do you know how to do?" asked Adams. The resounding response: "Grow coffee." Adams observed, "Across the border Presbyterians drink coffee every Sunday by the buckets. Maybe that's the answer."

## **A fruitful partnership**

The conversation confirmed a vision that already had been percolating in the mind of Daniel Cifuentes, a member of Lily of the Valley Church from Chiapas. He and Adams launched a plan and secured a micro-credit loan, and in 2002 Just Coffee—or Café

Justo—was born. A few families from the community of Salvador Urbina in Chiapas became founding cooperative growers. A couple of migrant families living in Agua Prieta became the roasters. Instead of the going price of 45 to 50 cents a pound for the

coffee beans, the farmers would get \$1.35, an amount calculated to meet the cost of production plus a living wage. The marketing plan included enlisting friends of Frontera de

Cristo in the United States to sell the coffee in their churches and to their neighbors.

The plan worked. In the eight years since Just Coffee began, two new communities in Chiapas have

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organized co-ops, one of them aided by funds from Presbyterian Women. As the coffee roasting, packaging, shipping and marketing operations have grown, the business has been able to hire new member-employees at much better wages than are common in Agua Prieta. Sales have risen from around 15,000 pounds of coffee the first year to more than 57,000 pounds. A grant from the PC(USA)'s Self-Development of People program has provided new and larger roasters. The participating farmers now get \$1.60 per pound for their coffee, plus benefits and ownership in the co-op. Most important, hundreds of would-be border-crossers now are able to stay in Mexico and earn a living.

Just Coffee contributes to a more stable economy for Agua Prieta. The city, in the state of Sonora, Mexico, just across the border from Douglas, Ariz., has become a magnet for the unemployed. They come to take low-wage jobs in factories (known as maquiladoras or maquilas) built by multinational corporations to take advantage of the binational duty-free zone established between Mexico and the United States in the 1970s.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico support Frontera de Cristo and five other ministries along the border. For 26 years these ministries have worked to meet the spiritual, social and physical



**A GROWING BUSINESS:** David Thomas, PC(USA) regional liaison to Mexico, in foreground, and Marcelo Salas, who helps roast and package coffee, examining a new and larger coffee roaster

needs of the migrants flooding the borderlands.

Most migrants are young men and women who come north alone, or with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Isolated from home and family, they face the dangers of crossing the border, the consequences of being apprehended while trying to cross and health crises that may result from the trauma of crossing. There is no family or communal structure

to help them through finding work, getting married, birthing and caring for children, and the inevitable economic, social and spiritual pressures of an economy prone to booms and busts. Some are lured into crime by the enticements of easy money.

Through involvement in Presbyterian Border Ministries volunteers from the United States learn about why people migrate and the challenges they face once they arrive at the border. Often upon returning home, they find ways to support border ministry from afar, such as by purchasing Just Coffee products and educating their friends.

David Thomas, regional liaison to Mexico for the PC(USA)'s General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC), says the border ministries' focus on long-term partnership in communities of mission practice offers a good model for mission work in other countries.

"Each of the six local ministry sites has a board of directors made



**A GROWING CHURCH:** Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church, near the Mexico border, which has grown and been enriched by the flow of migrants for 25 years and is now self-supporting



**BREAKING NEW GROUND:** a new Just Coffee plant for roasting and packing coffee beans

Pastor Jesus Gallegos and his wife, Rosario, encouraged and counseled Suzana. “Rosario prayed with me and reminded me that as bad as things were, God had something in store for me,” she says.

Eventually, the whole family came north. Rafael has begun working for Just Coffee. After an unhappy first marriage fell apart, leaving her with one child, Suzana has found fulfillment in a second marriage and in work much like the teaching job of her dreams—taking on a leadership role in the border ministry’s work with women and children.

### Social justice meets evangelism

The goals of evangelism and church growth do not always fit comfortably with the goals of social justice. But at Frontera de Cristo these goals have been woven together with wisdom and grace.

Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church has grown and been enriched by the flow of migrants from the South. Today, after 25 years, it has become self-supporting and has helped establish a new mission church that is moving toward full congregational status. Both churches owe their growth and stability in part to Frontera de Cristo and the economic transformation that has resulted from Just Coffee.

By hearing the stories of people like Mariana, Rafael and Suzana



**FOR CONSUMERS WITH A CONSCIENCE:** a display of Just Coffee ready to be purchased

up of members from both countries, and decision making takes into account the gifts and needs of each partner,” he explains. “God’s mission is best accomplished in this kind of partnership.”

### One family’s story

Rafael\* and Mariana\* are typical of the people helped by Presbyterian border ministries. Working as laborers on coffee-growing farms in southern Mexico, they saw their wages drop to less than a few cents a day after coffee prices plunged as low as 35 cents per pound.

Rafael and Mariana prayed. They consulted. They talked with their six children. Then they decided: Rafael would go north to Agua Prieta for a year by himself and try to find a job. If he could not find a job on the Mexican side of the border, he would cross.

Mariana agreed to the plan reluctantly, but she was scared. She had heard stories of migrants being robbed and left for dead, of people trying to cross the border and dying in the desert.

Rafael arrived in Agua Prieta in January 1994. “It was a long journey,” he recalls. “I had to walk to

town, then ride a bus for three days and nights. Thanks be to God, when I arrived in Agua Prieta and sought a job, one of the maquilas hired me right away.”

Back in Chiapas, the oldest daughter of Rafael and Mariana, Suzana,\* was struggling to reach her goal of becoming a teacher. Despite often being hungry, she spent weekdays studying, and worked as a housekeeper on weekends to earn room and board at her school. Eventually, Suzana had to leave school and follow her father up north to help support the family. She soon discovered that a 50-hour workweek in a maquila left no time or energy for studies.

Life was difficult for Suzana and Rafael in Agua Prieta. “We had one room between us and shared a bathroom and kitchen with other families,” Suzana says. “It was hot or cold all the time. Everything was different. Life was busier. Nobody knew anybody else. I constantly felt isolated.”

Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church and the ministries of Frontera de Cristo became a lifeline for Suzana and her father. Rafael says, “We had a home in the church.”

\*Not his/her real name

and by visiting and participating in the work of Presbyterian Border Ministries, U.S. Christians learn how their lives of affluence affect the lives of people south of the border. These ministries help people from both sides of the border to experience the hospitality and generosity of the people of God.

“A mission trip to our Border Ministries opens the door to powerful transformation,” says Hunter Farrell, director of World Mission for the GAMC. “Foreigners’ become our neighbors, and our previously wimpy understanding of Jesus’ great commandment—to love our neighbors as ourselves—can give way to a truly global discipleship in Christ.”

*Parrish Jones, a Presbyterian minister living in St. Augustine, Fla., is interim pastor of St. Johns Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Fla., and served as a volunteer at Frontera de Cristo in April 2010.*

## LEARN MORE about Presbyterian Border Ministries

For 26 years the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico have shared ministry at six sites along the 2,000-mile U.S./Mexico border. The gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed through new church development, promotion of justice and educational experiences for short-term visitors and long-term mission volunteers.

» For more information and links to the ministry sites (three in Texas, two in Arizona and one in Southern California): [www.binationalministry.org](http://www.binationalministry.org)

» For information about Just Coffee/Café Justo: [www.justcoffee.org](http://www.justcoffee.org)

» To learn more and join a group of Presbyterians working for just immigration: [www.pcusa.org/immigration](http://www.pcusa.org/immigration) or email Dana Dages ([dana.dages@pcusa.org](mailto:dana.dages@pcusa.org))

### RECENT RELATED BOOKS by Presbyterians

» *Just Coffee: Caffeine with a Conscience* by Mark Adams and Tommy Bassett III (purchase at [www.justcoffee.org](http://www.justcoffee.org))

» *Neighbor: Christian Encounters with “Illegal” Immigration* by Ben Daniel (Westminster John Knox Press). A Presbyterian minister in California provides a Christian case for embracing undocumented immigrants.

## Witness through a wire fence

Last October a group of Presbyterians from Texas and Mexico proclaimed their unity in Christ by celebrating the Lord’s Supper together at the U.S./Mexico border. The worshipers—55 from Texas and 25 from Mexico—passed Communion elements through the chain-link fence separating their two countries.

The worship service was part of a meeting of the Presbytery of Tres Rios. The rest of the meeting took place 15 minutes away at University Presbyterian Church in El Paso, Texas.

“Seeing the face of a friend through the wire fence on the border gives a very different perspective,” says José Luís Casal, general missionary of Tres Rios Presbytery. “I had the sensation that I was visiting a man in jail,” he adds, referring to his longtime colleague Jaime Dueñas, Mexican

coordinator of the Pasos de Fe border ministry, based in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

The service included hymns sung in both Spanish and English and a sermon by Judy Fletcher, executive of the Synod of the Sun. Preaching on 1 Kings 19:4–8, Fletcher described how an angel ministered to the prophet Elijah in the wilderness. “[Elijah] receives rest and food with no questions asked,” she said. “He was not asked for a green card. He simply received sanctuary.”

Local affiliates from all three major television networks broadcast the service. Afterward Casal told one reporter: “Our presence here in solidarity with our Mexican brothers and sisters demonstrates that fences or walls cannot divide the people of God.”—*Presbyterian News Service*



**UNITY IN CHRIST:** a group of Presbyterians from Texas and Mexico celebrating the Lord’s Supper last fall at the U.S./Mexico border