

A HOUSE BLEND

BY PAUL KURTZ

Paul Kurtz is director of Rosedale Business Group, an RMM program promoting business as missions. With his wife Grace, he runs Hemisphere Coffee Roasters in Mechanicsburg, Ohio. This article is made up of excerpts from his new book, A House Blend, about his experiences with business as mission in the coffee trade. HCR is a direct-trade enterprise with the goal of fair business and building up coffee-growing communities.

I remember in elementary school enthusiastically raising my hand believing I had something to say. When the teacher finally called on me she was not usually impressed! Writing this book has felt a bit the same way. So why do I write? I have something to share of what I have seen and experienced firsthand. This text began as a journal for me to keep track of God sightings and to chronicle a journey.

GOD'S STORY...THE WHY!

If God has had any part to play in my journey in coffee, it is because He desires to see His Kingdom (His rule and reign) come to the far reaches of the earth and in the region of Nicaragua, 40 kilometers outside Matagalpa specifically. He knows each farmer and picker by name and has heard their cries.

The Fall impacted relationships established at creation. We are all impoverished people due to lacking the fullness that God intended for us to experience with God, with ourselves, with others and with the creation. In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ we see that Jesus came to do more than save our souls. My favorite Christmas carol, "Joy To The World", says it well, "He comes to make, His blessings known, far as the curse is found." Jesus came to reconcile everything to God. All poverty, illness, and other effects of sin are yielded to Christ.

The second coming of Christ will bring healing to all relationships and all "wrongs are made right." This is



good news but what is our role until this second coming? I believe the Church is to be Christ's hands and feet, doing what Christ was doing. Perhaps more accurately Christ is the hand, we are His glove. The glove is what people see but it is the life of Christ in us that motivates our actions to serve.

Who are the poor? We may forget that the poor are not an abstraction but rather a group of human beings who have names, who are made in the image of God, whose hairs are numbered, and for whom Jesus died. The poor are poor largely because they live in networks of relationships that do not work for their well-being. Poverty is a result of our sinful nature and broken relationships. Think about it: Sin is what distorts all relationships. Sin is the root cause of deception, distortion, and domination.

Poverty is often associated with the lack of things: water, food, job, etc. The economically poor are seen as passive recipients, incomplete human beings we make complete with our stuff. This attitude can have two negative consequences. First, this attitude demeans and devalues the poor. It assumes they are defective and inadequate. They can then internalize this and view themselves this way. Second, our attitude about ourselves can be that we are the ones who can save them. Such an attitude is not good for our souls.

My work among coffee farmers began out of a desire to see poor communities economically "lifted" by receiving fair wages for their labor and to put together the pieces for a better future. However, I want to be clear: It is not enough to see people's lives improve economically. Jesus' complete work on the cross (the story of the book of Romans) provides for our atonement, and we are reconciled to God. Harmony and peace with God restores our view of self, our relationships with others and restores us to our Father, the Lover of our Souls. This is true transformation.

COFFEE'S STORY...THE WHAT!

It is amazing to me to consider the scope of coffee's impact on culture, society and the world; the "what" of this story. From busy upscale urban coffeehouses to the remote rugged mountainsides which grow the coffee, it is all connected. Someone's fingers touched the beans that were used to pull



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Much blood has been shed over the production of coffee over the last 200 years. Coffee is the number two traded commodity (the amount of money that changes hands) in the world, second only to oil. In 2009 four billion dollars of green coffee was imported into the USA alone. It is estimated that the coffee industry (roasting, coffeehouses, and grocery) accounts for 15 billion dollars annually in the USA. Coffee is big business and brokering green coffee has historically been dominated by a few large corporations. They set the price, the terms and the quality. Thankfully those days are changing with the specialty coffee movement and its focus on quality. The story of coffee is being told and coffee can now be sourced where you can meet the picker, trace the coffee to a particular hillside and understand exactly how the coffee farming community is benefiting because of your purchase. This is my passion!

I always say that "coffee is people." Producing coffee is a labor of love that consumes whole communities and regions. It cannot be consumed for food by the farmer when times are lean. When prices are so low that it's not worth picking, the farmer cannot decide to just feed it to his family, like he might corn or bananas. Coffee has no food value.

And this is the irony of the pricing issue. We, who cannot grow coffee and in fact, need others to do that for us, set the

prices and determine what we will pay. In response, many communities are forced to grow other crops or sell off prime coffee growing land for development or resorts.

The people that grow coffee do so with hopes of a better life, just as any farmer does. They hope prices are good and that all costs are covered with money left over. They desire sustainability of their farms and improving the lives for their children.

I will share something here that I have seen firsthand. It motivates me to action and has kept me awake at night. Very few people know about or understand what I am sharing here or to what extent this hardship is. In the very places I buy coffee there is real scarcity of food three to four

months out of the year. Recently, Rick Peysler, Director of Coffee Community Outreach for Green Mountain Roasters, systematically interviewed many small scale farmers and laborers in the very region I am working; El Tuma-La Dalia, Nicaragua. Over and over he asked this question: "Have there been any periods of extreme scarcity of food in your household over the past year?" The heads of the men and women would nod and their eyes begin to well up.

I have sat on the side porch at the farm house with Diego and Leslie Chavarria and heard it from them and seen it with my eyes. It is terrible. It rips at the Chavarria's hearts to see and experience. As Diego and I sat dreaming of a different scenario it was clear what I needed to do. In my direct purchase I have begun advancing funds for the next year's crop so these farmers can continue to employ their workers. If they went to a local bank for a short-term operating loan, interest rates can be as high as 30%, effectively stripping all profit from the crop. The exact amount Diego was paying to the bank each year to operate the previous year was the amount needed to keep the community working all year long.

But this is only one community. I ache for the 25 million families involved in coffee production around the world. Food scarcity throughout the coffee producing regions is real and while it is a complex issue and the result of a combination of mono-agriculture practices, low and unstable market price for coffee, decreasing yields, and lack of access to credit and financial options, the consumer has a moral obligation to address this problem. This, again, is my passion.

You may say, OK, Paul, how much good are you really doing? I would say, not much. But for those I am working with it is making all the difference. The injustice and corruption in existing models has motivated me to work at another way. A way that lets the farmer set his/her destiny through hard work and a reward for quality. It is a "hand up" not a "hand out." It connects coffee farmers in the developing world directly with the buyers. Let me introduce one such farmer and his story to you.

A FARMER'S STORY...THE WHO

The drive to Finca El Dorado could be a pleasant 30 minute ride out of Matagalpa, but it is more like a two-hour battle. The road is paved but in total disarray. Often you dodge one hole to hit two. The road is curvy as it winds up mountains, through passes, down steep grades

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and gives up glimpses of beautiful vistas. Cattle graze contentedly on the hills while forests and fields give way to wetlands and rivers. It is a lush, fertile landscape with increasing altitude as you make your way to El Tuma. This is coffee country.

LESLIE & DIEGO CHAVARRIA

Diego's father had several small farms 17 kilometers out of El Tuma and bought and sold merchandise, cows, and grain. This is where he raised his family. In the 1980s there was civil war and there was a lot of fighting in that area. The Chavarria family scattered and Diego and his family moved to Miami and then on to British Columbia.

The family house was directly hit by a mortar and only a crater remains today. It was in that house that Dan Byler, Kirk Christophel, Andy Troyer, Linda Hershberger and other Rosedale Mennonite Missions Voluntary Service personnel lived and worked at literacy and agricultural projects. Diego's father and mother became Christians and shortly after Diego and all his brothers as well. Dan Byler, RMM missionary, baptized some of the boys.

In 1986 Diego's father sold his other properties and bought the farm known as El Dorado. This farm has over 600 acres of land and much of it very high and suitable for growing good coffee.

After the war Diego would visit from Canada and help his father with his cattle and small coffee harvest.

In the early spring of 1996, his father asked him to move back to stay. That fall Diego moved his family along with his brother Leslie to Matagalpa, Nicaragua.



Diego and Leslie

When Diego came to the farm, he met with the families that live on the farm, around 90 people. There are little huts along the road housing these families. Diego promised to redo these homes once the farm was producing adequately. They need fresh water and a place to shower and do laundry. A generous donor came to me and offered to provide the funds to put new roofs and cement floors in the homes so Diego can honor his promise to these families. That was completed shortly thereafter.

A new farm kitchen is needed as is the washroom for families to get out of the creeks for bathing and laundry. I would love to help him do it all. However, I see my role best as an advocate to accurately represent the fine coffees from El Dorado farm to the US roaster market. As Leslie and Diego's coffee gains recognition, the value of the coffee can increase as well. These men are



El Dorado farm

"The farm is currently supporting seven pastors and all seven churches are ministering and blessing the communities they reside in."

proven community leaders and will allow God to use them as conduits of blessing to the entire community.

As coffee farmers have disposable income they can build, replace, and improve the facilities and properties as they feel best. This method of operation is not a handout to the Chavarria family but a hand up.

A ROASTER'S STORY...THE HOW

I was directing the short-term missions department for RMM (SEND Ministries Department). In 2000 I left the SEND Department and at the request of RMM board worked at developing innovative and non-typical assignments for long-term workers. I began to work at discovering what business opportunities might best serve our workers who go to restricted countries.

I had been to Central America and Ecuador. In both places Christian leaders were asking for money to fund projects, education for pastors, etc. Yet all around me was great coffee. I asked them why don't they raise coffee in profitable ways and self-fund their own projects. They laughed at me. They said coffee prices are so low they hardly have food to eat. I couldn't believe it. Coffee was \$10 per pound at the local Starbucks in Columbus, OH but only worth 50-70 cents per pound in these countries?

What was needed was a system whereby containers of green coffee are purchased at fair prices directly from farmers and distributed directly to roasters. This would cut out up to six middlemen who each one took some of the pie.

Rick and Deborah Cole and Grace and I started Hemisphere Coffee Roasters, LLC in 2002. In 2006 the Kurtz's became

the sole owners of HCR. Grace and I are deeply indebted to the Coles for their entrepreneurial vision and for stepping out in this with us. We bought the Roastery building at 22 South Main, Mechanicsburg, Ohio in August 2007.

I have received six containers directly from the El Dorado farm. This is quality coffee and has the lemony-chocolate flavors that buyers of Nicaragua washed coffee look for. The farm is currently supporting seven pastors and all seven churches are ministering and blessing the communities they reside in. They are looking carefully at two other communities that need churches as possible locations to expand into. Diego envisions reaching out to other local small farmers in the area and serve their drying needs as well.

Buying direct from the farmer means that the coffee can be traced right to the finca (farm), the families and the locality it was grown in. This is powerful. The coffee has a story. I have tried to tell you the story of Diego, coffee, myself, and a little about God's story. That is the power of buying directly from the farmer. You can have a part in the story. Diego's story can be yours as well as you enjoy this high grown coffee.

On this journey I am meeting other organizations and missionary teams who desire to source green coffee locally where they work and live, using direct-trade methods granting the growers a sustainable living. Coffees from places like Guatemala, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Costa Rica, Sumatra, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Thailand and Laos will soon be available with their own story to tell.

If I would sum up what I am learning, it is that God is looking for people who will allow themselves to be a conduit of blessing to those around them. Water that flows down the mountainside is life-giving to everything along its banks. This is the Living Water (figuratively speaking) that brings life to all it touches. God's invitation to all of us is to join Him. When the water source is dammed up it backs up and causes floods, ruin and stagnation. It is a challenge to live our life in a life-giving way allowing others to benefit and be blessed through us. I am blessed to be a blessing and you are blessed to be a blessing to someone. Grace and I enjoy meeting people in our Roastery and being a blessing in any way we can. Join us and be a blessing to others! **BB**



Visit www.hemispherecoffee.roasters.com to purchase A House Blend, or pick up a copy at the Roastery in Mechanicsburg. Paul Kurtz can be reached at paul@rmmoffice.org.