

The Rev. Lucy Hitchcock Seck has spent much of her life spreading respect for human dignity.

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It's Sunday afternoon in South Miami, and the Rev. Lucy Hitchcock Seck is busy selling bags of certified "fair-trade" coffee just after finishing services at the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The fair-trade beans are all the reverend buys and serves at her congregation and at home, even if they cost her a bit more.

With certified fair-trade products, she's sure farmers will get a bigger share of the money consumers spend, instead of it going to middlemen in the distribution chain. In some cases, fair-trade distributors guarantee minimum prices for crops, instead of nickel-and-diming producers to sell crops at the lowest price to reach bigger wholesalers.

Hitchcock Seck knows from traveling in Central America and Africa that a few dollars can make a world of difference for peasant farmers.

At one fair-trade cooperative in Nicaragua, peasants now can afford a mule to transport beans, rather than carrying heavy loads on their backs down a steep mountain.

"They're never going to get rich from it, but they're able to live in dignity," she said.

Dignity and justice are Unitarian principles that Hitchcock Seck strives to practice, not just preach.

That's why "Reverend Lucy," as she's affectionately called, is mobilizing against the FTAA in Miami.

She believes the free-trade accord, like NAFTA before it, will concentrate wealth and power as governments focus too much on the will of big corporations and too little on the needs and rights of the poor and marginalized.

"We don't have economic democracy in this world," she said, sadly, "because corporations have taken more and more of the power to the point where, in some cases, they have more power than nations."

Activism for justice comes naturally for the 62-year-old mother and grandmother, born in New York to two teachers who emphasized the value of public service.

Hitchcock Seck remembers volunteering at the public library during high school, supporting the free-school movement as a young mom, pushing to add women to the faculty of her seminary and marching against nuclear weapons and war in Central America while completing her doctoral studies.

Yet it was only after visiting Nicaragua and El Salvador in the late 1980s that she made the link with economics that now guides her work and led her to fair-trade coffee.

"That's when I saw how Third World people live for the first time," she said, describing widespread poverty, squalid housing and malnutrition. "And gradually, it grew in my consciousness that we cannot have peace in the world without economic justice."

For more than 20 years since then -- first in congregations in Boston, later in the Seattle area and now in Miami -- Hitchcock Seck and her colleagues have been organizing study groups on globalization, trying to find ways that people can have a real say on how resources are distributed.

The studies led her to protest World Trade Organization talks when she was living in Seattle in 1999. Hitchcock Seck made banners, offered her congregation's basement for meetings by farmers' groups and marched peacefully toward the city center from southeast Seattle.

"We could see tear gas ahead of us, but never got gassed," she said of the demonstrations that attracted an estimated 20,000 people.

Instead of violence, Hitchcock Seck found love at the WTO protests. She met her husband there, an advocate for small farmers who comes from Senegal.

Last year, her studies produced a different, more generalized outcome. U.S. Unitarians -- with more than 1,000 congregations and almost 150,000 members nationwide -- approved a call to action for economic justice.

Hitchcock Seck hopes the FTAA protests can speed the road to justice and dignity and push governments to focus on people, not profits.

"Join the march in Miami," she urged. "We expect it to be safe, with marshals, peacekeepers and the police keeping order ... This is an opportunity to make banners stating our values and to get media exposure. It's our chance to say: `This needs to change. It's affecting our lives, our children, our land and our souls.'"

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