These notes explore the theme of coming together to make a difference. They can be used flexibly as the basis of a sermon, talk or group session during or around the time of Fairtrade Fortnight.

They include examples from Traidcraft Exchange’s work in Bangladesh and Tanzania to change trade and change lives.

**Introduction**

How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! (Psalm 133)

Coming together is important for Christians. You could almost say that it’s impossible to be a Christian on your own!

Explore the example of the early church in Acts 2, 42-47.

The first Christians made a point of coming together, and sharing with each other. They ‘held everything in common’ and sold property and possessions to give to anyone in need.

In some ways this was a continuation of the way the first disciples had lived with Jesus during his ministry, leaving behind their homes, their families and their security to follow Christ.

What does this teach us about how we should live now? We probably aren't prepared to all move in together – but how can we support each other in our local church? And in the wider world?

We live in a society which values individual freedom and action. We’re encouraged to ‘do our own thing’ and ‘look after number one’. So how can we respond practically to God’s calling to come together in community? And how can we work together to help make the world a fairer and more just place for everyone?

The next sections explore some practical things which have happened when people have come together.
Fairtrade Fortnight

Fairtrade Fortnight has been celebrated for more than 20 years and is an opportunity to focus on the impact that fair trade can have.

The very idea of fair trade – that we can buy in a way that guarantees people are paid fairly – came about when people came together and started to think about what they could do to end exploitation.

Consumers in this country wanted to know that the food they bought and the things they loved were made in a way that gave a fair reward for the hard work of the people who grew or made them.

And around the world, farmers and workers came together in producer groups and co-operatives to demand a better deal from trade.

Together we showed that trade could be fair and that we could have an honest relationship between rich and poor that benefited everyone. Today fair trade has grown far beyond the dreams of its founders, and millions of farmers and workers around the world benefit from it.

But there is still more to do – particularly for people around the world who trade in local or regional markets. Trade with the UK, Europe or America is still something that only a few people in poorer countries benefit from. Given the challenge to reduce fossil fuels and limit carbon emissions, international trade isn't always the answer.

Traidcraft Exchange is a charity which works with farmers and artisans, many of whom trade locally, but are still exploited or excluded from the opportunities this could bring.
One group of people who are often excluded from opportunities are people living with disabilities.

Disabled people in Tanzania are statistically more likely to be unemployed and illiterate. They often have low levels of education, little access to support networks, and deal with stigma and prejudice on a daily basis.

Traidcraft Exchange is working with disabled farmers in rural and isolated areas in Tanzania to help them come together in groups and get a better deal from trade.

Thabiti Nwoza is one of them. He grows coffee, maize, beans and bananas on a small plot of land in Isanza, central Tanzania, to support his wife Rachel and seven children.

Thabiti has a physical disability in his legs, which makes it difficult for him to carry out many of the tasks on his farm. This means he must pay people to help him with almost every aspect of his work.

For one kilogram of his coffee Thabiti only receives about £1. He must wait four months to be paid and has no control over the price, as there is only one coffee buyer who visits the area. Thabiti says:

‘The price we get is not fair—it does not cover the cost of production. Sometimes we fail to make profit.’

‘What they pay isn’t enough because I have seven children and have to pay for school fees and food.’

The issues faced by farmers like Thabiti won’t be solved overnight. They are complex and Traidcraft Exchange’s project is still at an early stage. But what’s already clear to Thabiti is that coming together with other disabled farmers, to learn, work and socialise together, has made a huge difference to his life.

Since joining the group Thabiti has undertaken training in practical skills such as book-keeping, as well as learning about prejudice and stigma towards disabled people. He says:

‘We have learnt about discrimination at family, community and even government level. I think this will help us stamp out discrimination.’

What’s more, the connection he feels with other group members has brought him great happiness. He says:

‘Being part of the group gives me comfort and really good consolation. I meet with others with disabilities and they’re my friends, we accept each other, we accept our disabilities.’
Another group of people who are often very vulnerable to exploitation in trade are women. In rural Bangladesh, women often have very little say even within their families.

Traidcraft Exchange has been working with women in south west Bangladesh, where many very poor families have little or no land of their own.

The area is famous for producing high quality jute – used to make rope and sacks – and one of the few ways that women here can earn extra income is by stripping the jute fibres from the stalks.

It’s a hard physical job which involves squatting on the riverbanks in damp dirty conditions. Many of the women said they got back pains and infections on their hands and feet from this work.

And at the end of all this, they earned just one Bangladeshi taka – that’s less than one UK penny – per bundle of jute sticks, plus the sticks, which are used for firewood. In fact in some areas, they didn’t get any money, and were just paid in kind with the sticks.

Through the project, Traidcraft Exchange has helped groups of women come together and support each other. They have been able to save small amounts of money and have been supported to set up their own small businesses. They have also worked with men in the community to help them see the benefits of this new approach.

This is what Halima Begum, one of the women involved in the project, said about the difference it has made:

‘Because we had so little money, I used to argue with my husband over different issues – but I don’t anymore. I used to have to borrow money from others, and then to pay that, I had to borrow from somewhere else. That doesn’t happen anymore.’

By working together, the women have been able to negotiate a much better payment for the work they do extracting the jute – in some areas they are now paid five times as much.

But most importantly, being involved in the project has given them confidence and self-belief.

Arifa Begum explains the impact this has had: ‘I have become very courageous... I couldn’t even receive a simple phone call – but now I do regularly!’
Ways we can respond

Encourage people to think about practical steps they can take as a church to come together and help make the world a fairer and more just place for everyone.

Here are some ideas – you will have others!

- Come together to hold a Big Brew coffee morning and raise money to support the work of Traidcraft Exchange. You’ll be helping more people like Thabiti, Halima and Arifa build their skills and confidence so they can have a brighter future.

- Buy fair trade where you can – why not commit to ordering church tea and coffee from Traidcraft? (go to www.traidcraftshop.co.uk)

- Support campaigns to help people who are exploited or excluded through trade. Traidcraft Exchange is campaigning to hold British companies to account if they harm communities abroad – you can find out more at www.traidcraftexchange.org/against-land-grabs
Prayers

Lord God
You create all people in your image
and you grieve to see this broken world.

We pray for those who are abused
or exploited in the scramble for profit.
May they have justice.

Forgive us our part
and give us the strength
to campaign for change. Amen.

Traidcraft Exchange

Lord God,
In the fields of the poor
Even when abundant fruits ripen,
Injustice sweeps them away,
And families hunger.
Help us to share
The fruits of Your bounty
So that all Your family may benefit
From Your gracious gifts.

Christian Concern for One World
(based on Proverbs 13:23)

Tilt the scales, O God of the mustard seed:
That the poor shall see justice.

Share the feast, O God of Eden's abundant
garden:
That each crop may fetch a fair price.

Upset the tables, O God of the upside-
down Kingdom:
That the least can benefit from their trade.

Open our eyes, O God of life in all its
fullness:
That we may learn to walk the way of your
son tilting, sharing, upsetting this world

Not satisfied until the products we bring
to our table
Give a better deal, to all who hunger for
one.

In His name, Amen.

Christian Aid

In this time of change
Help us come together Lord

As we look for signs of hope
Help us come together Lord

With a vision of a better world
Help us come together Lord

Listening to your Word
Help us come together Lord

Help us come together Lord
And build the Kingdom in
your name.
Amen.

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