

Churches' usage of fair trade palms is on the rise.

As the world becomes more interconnected, decisions that once affected only local communities now impact people around the globe. That's why many congregations today are aligning their beliefs and values to support environmentally and socially responsible organizations.

### **For the Environment**

To help protect and sustain its land, our palm supplier regularly replants natural vegetation and has built numerous ponds for native wildlife and birds. In 2004, the company donated 322 acres of virgin native brush as native habitat to the Texas Land Conservancy (formerly the Natural Area Preservation Association, NAPA) to create the "Harriet B. Ginsbach Wilderness Area," a permanent sanctuary (<http://www.texaslandconservancy.org>).

"Native plants and wildlife have been depleted in the Rio Grande Valley because of ongoing development," says David Bezanson, former executive director of the Austin, Texas based NAPA. "{Their} history and biological diversity make it one of the most unique properties donated to us. We're grateful they were willing to help preserve the rare species of animals, plants, and trees."

### **Protecting People**

While many churches have become actively involved in the environmental issues surrounding harvesting, they are equally concerned about the harvesters. Unfortunately in some areas, particularly in Central American countries, laborers often work under exploitative conditions and underpayment. Such injustices not only impact the lives of the workers, but also further perpetuate poverty in these communities.

Every year our palm supplier provides several hundred jobs to people in one of the lowest economic regions of the U.S. The company is known for its fair working conditions, and as a result, nearly 75 percent of their workers return year after year.

### **Peaceful Palms**

In recent years, churches have become increasingly concerned with the harvesting of leaves and decorations used in their Palm Sunday celebrations. Questions have emerged about one palm variety in particular: the Chamaedorea, or Bella Palm, a tropical palm with leaves resembling a fern. The Chamaedorea palm has been especially plagued by aggressive harvesting, which has resulted in a depletion of Mexico and Central America rain forests.

Chamaedorea harvesting has been central to the sustainability discussion, and is typically used by florists. Environmentally minded palm growers, like our Texas-based palm supplier, do not sell the tropical Chamaedorea palm. In fact, over its 55-year history, the company has primarily grown the Sabal palm, which is native to the company's South Texas location. Our palm supplier sells strips from the Sabal palm, as well as ornamental leaves from other desert palms.

"We view our trees as a long-term investment," Executive Director Dirk Westphal says, "We harvest the leaves every year until the tree reaches 8-10 feet. At that height, the tree requires someone to use a ladder to reach the leaves, and we don't want to endanger our workers. So, we'll sell the palm for landscaping in yards, golf courses, roadways, and commercial sites."

### **Supporting the Community**

Since 1953, our palm supplier has adhered to a high standard of environmental stewardship and social responsibility. To further make a stand, this year our palm supplier has pledged a portion of their sales to 4 non-profit organizations benefiting environmental and humanitarian efforts.

For most churches, making responsible choices is part of the overall commitment to living their faith. By talking with distributors, congregations can learn about fair trade – ensuring the palms used for Holy Week celebrations were harvested in a way that truly reflects the seasonal spirit.