

# “Silk For Life” Offers Hope

“Silk For Life” is a project with a two-fold purpose. First, it is offering employment for weavers in Milwaukee. Second, it is giving an opportunity for farmers in distant Colombia to stop growing the plants from which cocaine is made.

Community UCC in Elkhart Lake, with the leadership of Rev. Robert Johnston, is taking an interest in the program. And there is support from the United Reformed Church in England, which received word of “Silk for Life” as part of their ecumenical partnership with our Conference.

With money and expertise from the United States, farmers in Colombia are able, through “Silk for Life,” to remain on their land, replacing their coca plants with mulberry plants, in order to grow silkworms. A typical farmer in the remote mountains of Colombia can earn about \$100 per month raising coca plants. A farmer cultivating silk worms can earn \$300 monthly. As farmers in Colombia teach other farmers the techniques of raising silkworms, the commitment to raise cocoons (and not coca plants) is growing. Shipments of mulberry cuttings are eagerly awaited and the transfer of crops is taking place.

Through “Silk for Life,” rural Colombian women are forming cooperatives to process and spin the cocoons into silk yarn. This yarn is being sent to Milwaukee where inner-city women are being employed to weave the yarn into silk materials. Beautiful, silk scarves are being produced, along with other products made from Colombian silk yarn.

Last year, the Congress of the United States voted unanimously to support this conversion of farmers’ fields in Colombia from the coca plant to the production of yarn for silk. \$200,000 was allocated but, to date, none of the money has been sent to the farmers. Rev. Johnston strongly believes that the long-term value of the “Silk for Life” project is well worth the relatively small investment by our government, since producing silk cocoons from mulberry plants is a viable and profitable alternative to the continued production of coca (cocaine) in the Colombian mountains.

A “Silk for Life” Gift Shop has opened in Milwaukee (281 S. Second Street). Silk scarves and other silk and wool products are being sold. The

scarves are also available as fund-raisers for church groups. For information on this and on how your congregation might relate to “Silk for Life,” contact the Silk for Life Workshop at (414) 272-6621 or Rev. Johnston at Community UCC, Elkhart Lake.



First harvest of silk cocoons in coca country, Colombia.



Nancy Siewert and Kerry Evans help Hmong employees set up loom for scarf production in Milwaukee.



Pat Conway, Executive Director of “Silk for Life,” visits newly planted mulberry field in coca country, Colombia.