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A Living Wage: Let Justice Roll

By Matt Myres and Reverend Norman Cram

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, June 9th will consider a Living Wage Ordinance calling for a minimum wage of \$15 an hour for approximately 5,500 low-wage workers employed by the county and county contractors. Over the last several months, eight faith leaders have presented their perspective on the living wage during public comment at board meetings. We would like to share this “faith perspective.”

Rising Inequality and Low-Wage Workers

The California Franchise Tax Board reported that the wealthiest 1 percent of Californians increased their income by 125 percent from 1987 to 2012, while the bottom 80 percent of Californians had declining incomes. According to the report, *The State of Working Sonoma (2013)*, 30 percent of the county population are “working poor” and reside in families that receive less than \$47,100 a year (with at least one family member working).

The working poor in our county do not earn a living or self-sufficiency wage. In Sonoma County, two adults, working full time to support two children, must each earn \$20.51 per hour to pay for basic necessities (and without receiving any public assistance) according to the California Budget Project.

The proposed law would cover about 3,800 “In Home Support Service” (IHSS) who currently earn \$11.65 an hour and janitors paid \$9 an hour, as well as other low-wage workers such as park aides, security guards, landscapers, county fair temps and recycling workers.

Faith and Justice for the Poor

In response to growing economic inequality and the thousands of struggling workers, the faith community has been at the core of the nationwide “Fight for \$15” movement. There is a rich faith tradition that prioritizes justice for the poor.

Beginning with scripture, God created the earth and made people in God's image. As stewards of God's creation, we have a right to the things we need to live and we have an obligation to ensure that others have those same rights.

The United Methodist Church also "recognizes the responsibility of governments to develop and implement sound fiscal and monetary policies that provide for the economic life of individuals. Every person has the right to a job at a living wage."

When the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they had been instructed not to mistreat the weakest members of their community, since the Israelites had once themselves been slaves. Prophets, such as Jeremiah, point to injustice as a sign of infidelity to God: "Woe to him who builds his house on wrong, his terraces on injustice, who works his neighbor without pay, and gives him no wages."

Jesus of Nazareth identified himself with the weakest persons by asserting that whatever we do or fail to do to the least amongst the people we are doing to Jesus. Resisting the structures of inequality and the ideology that blames the sick and disabled for their own condition, Jesus healed the outcasts and sent them back into the fold of their community.

In modern times, many churches developed social teachings. With the onset of industrialization in the 19th century, Pope Leo XIII wrote an encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, which addressed the rights of workers: "If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accept harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice."

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The moral principle of the Living Wage movement is that any person who works full-time has a right to receive a living wage that allows him/her to meet basic needs and not to rely on government services to make ends meet. Government should not be creating poverty jobs.

Pope Francis recently asserted in his book, *Joy of the Gospel*, "The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and can only lead to new crisis...Inequality is the root of social ills."

Justice for County Workers

Members of the faith community campaigning for the Living Wage Ordinance are asking the county why it continues to pay poverty wages to these 5,500 workers. Moreover, Jeanette Wicks-Lim, a University of Massachusetts Researcher, concluded that the county can afford to provide a wage of \$15 an hour and that this wage will only have a modest impact of less than 1 percent of the annual total county budget of \$1.4 billion.

Let's urge our Sonoma County Supervisors to pass the proposed Living Wage Ordinance of \$15 an hour and, as the prophet Amos proclaimed, "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an unfailing stream."

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