

LIVING WAGE

A Theological Digest

All discussion about "the Living Wage" rests on two main points:

1. Why is such a wage a moral imperative?
2. How do we determine the actual amount of pay required by the Living Wage?

For Christians, the assertion that a "Living Wage" is a moral imperative, is rooted in the witness of Scripture. The prophetic witness of the Hebrew scriptures repeatedly emphasizes that "God. . . executes justice for the oppressed; gives food to the hungry. . . lifts up those who are bowed down. . . [and] upholds the orphan and the widow. . ." (Psalm 146) and asks: "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness?" (Micah 6:8)

Jesus continues this witness when he challenges a rich man to put justice and relationship with others first and "sell all that he owns, and give the money to the poor." (Mark 10:21) When asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus includes love for the neighbor (Mark 12:31). The parable of the workers in the vineyard, in illustrating the lavishness of God's grace, serves as an example to Christians of honoring the value of the laborer and considering their need more important than their earnings. (Matthew 20:1-16) We are further asked in 1 John: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 John 3:17)

We are called to value all people because the standards of this world are not the final arbiter of justice, for our hope for a just world rests in our eschatological vision. A new creation is coming into being even now and, although the final realization of perfect love, justice and community lies in the future, Christians are already called to act, to respond to the reign of God embodied in that eschatological reality described by John as a world without "mourning, crying or pain." (Revelation 21:4) Christians believe that we live in the "between times" (Romans 8:18-25) and therefore our lives are fundamentally changed by the demands of the future reality on the present. We are a community of effective hope based on faith.

Faith communities bring four major assets to the dialogue and actions that affect the Common Good:

1. We can offer a consistent set of moral principles for assessing issues.
2. Our churches bring to the dialogue broad experience in serving those in need.
3. The Christian community is large and brings great diversity to the dialogue.
4. Christians are called to a common commitment to support and protect everyone, especially the poor and vulnerable. Therefore we affirm the fruitfulness of the relationship of our Christian faith to the wellbeing of society.

Every human person is created in the Image of God, and the denial of dignity to a person is a blot on this image. This is where morality (love and justice) comes together with economic issues.

We are a diverse network of Christians in Vermont working together to serve the common good through public worship and prayer; acts of mercy and care; and loving prophetic witness for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.

To say that the "business of business is business," and only that, fails to see the reality of the whole of which business is only a part. Economic performance at a profit is a worthy objective, but maximizing profits at the expense of all else converts a worthy objective into an imperial obsession.

Those that mistakenly argue that the duty of business management is only to stockholders, fail to see that stockholders also are "stakeholders" because they have a fundamental role in and duty to the general welfare of the whole of our society. Stockholders are not the only stakeholders in our society. Workers, customers, neighbors, and the public at large have, in varying ways, a stake in the well-being of society, sometimes, indeed, a deeper stake than stockholders, who may dart in and out of their investments more easily than workers and neighbors.

How are we to think of workers, employees, who serve the business corporations and companies by their work? Like stockholders and management, workers are first and foremost persons, with the dignity of personhood, the image of God. And as persons they are first stakeholders in the common good of society before they are workers. Whatever the shape of the business in which workers are in service to the corporation, this is secondary to their status as fellow citizens with owners of capital and managers of business.

It is a paradox, perhaps, but it is our belief that the fundamental relationship of workers to those who employ them is that which the Bible notes as a "covenant" relationship. The wage contract relationship is subordinate to that of persons to persons in actually loving and caring for another. The "living wage" is given to the worker for his or her sake because the employer identifies with the worker as not only a participant in the business process, but first because both employer and employee participate together as persons who love each other. Not out of self-interest or even a partnership. This notion of a "covenant relationship" between employer and employee expands mutual obligations (for the worker also must see the employer as a person who must be cared for by the worker).

Our Christian and shared vision enables us to see that a "living wage" for every worker is that compensation which befits the person for whom she/he is and should become. The Living Wage is a means for full participation in all the benefits of the Common Good.

We humans are created to be and live together sharing through our common efforts, the preservation of our lives, health, protection from criminals, the development of our minds (knowledge and education), works of beauty, the enjoyment of play and leisure, all, in truth, that every human person requires to flourish, to be all that we can be. Ultimately we are all called to give ourselves together to God, the supreme Common Good of all those who love God and live with God now and in eternity. We even speak of "work" itself as a common good of all persons. Work has dignity because the worker is a person. Thus it is that "work is for the human person" and not that human persons exist for work.

Labor is always the primary agency (cause) of what is produced and the economic means of producing it. This does not mean that labor dominates management. After all, managers are also workers. Workers and



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work come first because everything else is the result of their work. Everything else is at the service of the workers and work. We continually repeat: Persons are more important than things.

We say boldly that the justice of a whole socioeconomic system and the just functioning of a business, deserve, in the final analysis, to be evaluated by the way in which a person's work is properly remunerated.

We suggest that justice should be understood here in the matter of the Living Wage as giving to persons that which is due to them by right. "Right" is not understood to be a power to do something but fundamentally as a relationship between persons (it presupposes more than one person: persons in a community). The relationship is based on the recognition of the need (not just the want or desire) of a person for something good for his or her flourishing and the ability of another not only to recognize it but to supply what is needed so that as persons they are brought into some kind of equality.

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