

The Living Wage Movement: It is about more than just wages

Writing on Living Wage in the May issue of *The Witness*, Walter Brueggeman observes of God's rescue of the enslaved Israelites as told in the Exodus story: That rescue, however, was not an easy miracle. It was accomplished through tedious, nerve-wracking negotiations led by Moses, supported and authorized by God. In some part, this emancipation of the helpless poor who became Israel is accomplished by human agency that refused to accept degrading poverty and economic injustice as a permanent or legitimate social condition. Brueggeman's description of the prolonged face-down between Moses and Pharaoh before the Israelites were liberated is an apt template for the growing living wage movement around the country. It is apt not only in the great effort it demands, but also in the vision of new hope that is empowering its refusal to accept degrading poverty and injustice as an ongoing social condition. And we can be encouraged by the progress: a new national study released in March shows that living wage laws are not only attracting increasing support (with over 80 now enacted since 1994 dozens more pending), but are actually working to reduce poverty levels.

Moreover, the religious community is increasingly getting involved. But what is the importance of the living wage issue anyway? How significant is it in the larger scheme of critical social justice issues facing the Church, such as hunger, poverty, racism, sexism and the justice of the economic system itself? It may be helpful to look first at the term itself: living wage. Unlike the term minimum wage, which is an economic category, the notion of a living wage has a moral connotation. Behind it is a simple but powerful premise, namely that anyone who works full time for a living should not have to raise a family in

poverty. But it is not yet widely recognized that living wage campaigns and the strategy driving the leading advocates of the movement embrace much more than just the aim of raising the wages of low-income workers. The movement embraces a larger vision and is basically about three things: power, the distribution of power, and the responsibility of government to ensure that fairness and justice prevail in our cities and communities (and ultimately in our nation).

To sum up the importance of the Living Wage movement as a social justice issue: it is clearly an issue which begins to address the larger systemic issues facing us. It addresses hunger, racism, sexism, economic injustice and the powerlessness of those at the bottom of the ladder, who are disproportionately people of color and women. All of these issues, needless to say, are deeply intertwined with the present tolerance of an unjust economic order.

Where to turn for more information on how to become involved in this issue?

It is helpful to know that the two most recent General Conventions of the Episcopal Church have passed resolutions supporting our involvement both living wage campaigns in our communities, and our need to pay the Churches own employees a living wage. More importantly, both in interfaith collaboration and within the Episcopal Church there has already been significant involvement in living wage campaigns, most prominently in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, which has acquired a large body of experience from its own clergy and laity on up to its bishops. Work on a living wage campaign is of course complex, demanding and rewarding.