

Workers Are Worth Their Keep

*A Theological Companion to Making Ends Meet
After the Great Recession: The 2010 Living Income Standard*



North Carolina Council of Churches

Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

Acknowledgements

Lee Foster and Keith Gustine, Duke Divinity School interns with the NC Council of Churches, provided the primary research and writing for this resource. Chris Liu-Beers, Program Associate with the Council, compiled and formatted everything. Aleta Payne, Associate for Development and Communications, assisted with editing. The Council's Executive Director, Rev. George Reed, has overseen this project since its inception. He wrote the introduction and also helped with editing.

Many thanks to our colleagues and friends at the NC Justice Center, whose excellent research and publications provide vital data and analysis for policymakers and concerned citizens across the state.

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About the North Carolina Council of Churches

The North Carolina Council of Churches was founded in 1935. We are a statewide ecumenical organization promoting Christian unity and working towards a more just society.

The Council enables denominations, congregations, and people of faith to individually and collectively impact our state on issues such as economic justice and development, human well-being, equality, compassion and peace, following the example and mission of Jesus Christ.

Our members include 27 judicatories of 18 denominations and eight individual congregations. Across the state, our members have over 6,200 congregations with about 1.5 million congregants.

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Introduction

*True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar;
it understands that an edifice which produces
beggars needs restructuring.
~ Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

*A just wage for the worker is the ultimate test of whether an
economic system is functioning justly.
~ Pope John Paul II*

I can still see her in my mind's eye.

It was 1969, and I was part of a choir premiering the folk musical "Good News" in Europe. (In Baptist circles, it was the trailblazing work that brought – gasp! – guitars into a lot of churches.) One of our stops was a large gathering in Berne, Switzerland, of Baptist youth from all over the world.

Bag lunches were served every day to all of us at the Youth Congress, several thousand people. The meal included a piece of luncheon meat. (I remember distinctly that it was tongue one day.) There was a hard roll, about the size and consistency of a baseball. A piece of fruit. And a candy bar that tasted like instant coffee flakes dipped in chocolate. We groused a lot about the lunches and tossed a lot of food in the trash.

We were on our tour bus, about to leave the dorm where we had been staying, when a few of us saw her. She looked about sixty years old, and she looked like she could have been my grandmother. She came quietly around the corner of the building, went straight to the big trashcan, and started digging out our throw-away lunches. She put what she could find in a bag, and she was gone.

Sheltered life that I had led, I had never before seen someone using a trashcan as a food source.

In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus tells one of his most famous parables about an anonymous Rich Man and his poor neighbor Lazarus. What a study in contrasts! The rich man "feasting sumptuously" every day. We may feast on Thanksgiving and Christmas, or even for regular Sunday dinners. But every day? And he dressed in the finest clothes. He clearly had it made. By contrast, Lazarus ate whatever crumbs he could find, and his health care was provided by the neighborhood dogs. The contrast continues after both have died. Lazarus finds himself in heaven, comforted by none other than Father Abraham. Rich Man finds himself in hell, not comforted by anybody.

And what was Rich Man's sin? Why did he end up in hell, looking over to the other side? The passage doesn't say for sure. It does not say that his failing was simply his wealth. There's nothing to suggest that he had gotten rich directly at the expense of Lazarus. Or that Lazarus was his oppressed worker. Or that Rich Man kicked Lazarus every time he went by. There's really nothing to indicate that Rich Man ever even paid any attention to Lazarus. And maybe that's it. Maybe Rich Man had managed to come and go, day after day, without really seeing Lazarus outside his house. How could Rich Man help if he didn't even see the man in need?

John put things in the proper order when he asked, "If you have the world's goods and see your brother and sister in need, yet

close your heart against them, how does God's love abide in you?" (1 John 3:17).

I first had to see the woman in Berne. And, while I can't tell you that we piled off our bus and rushed over to help, I can tell you that her image had a lot to do in pointing me towards ministry that addresses the laws and systems that force people to become dumpster divers.

For those of us who are comfortably middle class (or above), the situation of our brothers and sisters who toil away at low wage jobs is something we just don't see. The minimum wage is currently \$7.25 per hour. You can run the math on that. \$7.25 per hour. Forty hours per week. Fifty-two weeks per year. One person working full-time, all year, with no vacation, no time off for anything, would earn \$15,080, before payroll taxes.

We could talk about how that's less money than the federal poverty level for a family of four. And we could talk about how that poverty level is an outdated measure of poverty, how a family living just above "poverty" can't pay for its basic needs.

"A job should lift people out of poverty, not keep them in it."

Instead, I want you to imagine yourself as a single parent with one or two kids. Try figuring out your family budget. Start with rent. If you are not currently a renter, check out what rents are in your community. Find out what kind of place you and your kids would have for \$500 per month. It's another part of actually seeing Lazarus.

Then there's food. Transportation to get to your job. Child care, if your kids are too young to be at home by themselves. Telephone. Clothes. Can you imagine what that life would be like? For those of us who have never been there, I doubt that we can. But it's those of us who have never been there who, like the Rich Man in Luke 16, most need to see our modern-day Lazaruses.

And then, as John says, we will be inclined to help, because, after all, we do know God's love.

That help may take the form of charity. Giving canned goods and used clothes. Helping out at the free clinic. Working on a Habitat home. But our response also needs to include justice. It's just not right for someone working full-time not to earn enough to support her family. As the Let Justice Roll living wage campaign has reminded us, "A job should lift people out of poverty, not keep them in it." For those of us who are employers, the justice response means paying our employees a living wage. And being sure that our churches and other religious institutions are paying a living wage. To all our employees.

And for all of us, the justice response means working to raise the minimum wage to something that is actually adequate to support a family's basic needs. In the summer of 2006, a strong coalition of faith-based activists—bishops and laypeople, pastors and children, conservatives and progressives—came together to secure passage of legislation which increased the minimum wage. It wasn't enough even then, but it was better than nothing. Now five years of increasing costs – think especially of escalating health care costs and of everything that \$4 gasoline means – are putting the issue back on our radar screens. Is there the political will to address the minimum wage again? We must find out.

Introduction

Because low-wage workers still struggle to make ends meet. And because, having seen them, how can we not help?

A new study by the North Carolina Budget and Tax Center, entitled *Making Ends Meet After the Great Recession: The 2010 Living Income Standard*, highlights the challenges facing low-wage workers across the state:

For many in North Carolina, work falls far short of its promise. Almost 35 percent of North Carolinians in 2009 earned low incomes while working, and the number and proportion of such families has risen since 2000.

During the last decade, the number of low-wage work opportunities grew at a greater rate than the number of well-paying jobs with benefits. Then the Great Recession struck, devastating the finances of workers who did not earn enough to build substantial nest eggs of savings and assets. This one-two punch of the prevalence of low-wage work and the Great Recession has contributed to the accelerated growth in the struggles working families face on a day-to-day basis. These daily challenges can quickly become generational struggles as low-wage jobs are less likely to support children's healthy development and increasingly can doom children to a lifetime of low earnings and limited economic mobility.

Restoring not only the promise of work but also the opportunity for well-paying jobs with benefits is the central challenge confronting North Carolina as the state maps its course out of the Great Recession.

This companion to *Making Ends Meet After the Great Recession* is meant to bring the issue of wages into conversation with theological perspectives of economic justice. *Workers Are Worth Their Keep* is divided into three main sections. The first section (p. 3) highlights passages from the Bible that speak directly about economic justice, fair pay for workers, and the call of God to treat workers with dignity. Here we find that the Bible speaks directly to the question of living wages.

The second section (p. 5) examines the perspectives of several major figures from Christian traditions. While their contexts vary greatly, their voices converge around the calling to pay workers wages that are fair and just. For these theologians, to rob workers of living wages is to sin against God.

The third and final section of this resource (p. 7) quotes from official statements from many of the denominations represented in the NC Council of Churches. Nearly all denominations across the theological spectrum agree that wages are a moral issue and that workers should be treated with dignity and respect. In particular, many statements highlight the need for families to be able to support themselves through their work – a need that is not always met by today's low-wage industries.

I hope that *Workers Are Worth Their Keep* will help people of faith to focus on fair wages as an issue of faith, an issue addressed by our scriptures, by our theologians, and by our denominations. May it lead us to get involved and to make a difference.

Rev. George Reed, Executive Director, NC Council of Churches
July 2011



Making Ends Meet After the Great Recession:

The 2010 Living Income Standard
for North Carolina

By Alexandra Forter Sirota
with Edwin McLenaghan

NC BUDGET & TAX CENTER
A project of the



Download the full report at: www.ncjustice.org/?q=node/916

Work provides not only the ability to meet the most basic human needs but also access to new opportunities and a sense of dignity and purpose, all of which have driven America's economic growth for generations. For many in North Carolina, however, work falls far short of its promise. Restoring not only the promise of work but also the opportunity for well-paying jobs with benefits is the central challenge confronting North Carolina as the state maps its course out of the Great Recession.

Yet, without a meaningful measure of the economic pressures facing low-wage families, it is difficult to determine the scope of the challenge and guide a response. The North Carolina Budget and Tax Center created the Living Income Standard (LIS), a market-based approach to estimating how much income a working family with children must earn in order to pay for basic expenses. The LIS provides a conservative estimate of how much it truly costs to make ends meet in the state.

This 2010 version of the Living Income Standard finds that the North Carolina family of two adults and two children must earn \$48,814 annually—an amount equal to 221 percent of the federal poverty level—to afford the actual costs of seven essential expenses: housing, food, childcare, health care, transportation, taxes and other necessities (like clothing, personal care items, household supplies, school supplies and local telephone service). To meet that level, the adults in the average four-person family would need to earn a combined \$23.47 per hour and work 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year.

Biblical Passages in Support of Living Wages & Economic Justice

Background

The message from the Old and New Testaments on the dignity of work is clear – those who labor deserve to be treated with respect. As with most social justice issues, the Biblical witness around economic oppression was radical at the time and crucial for today, driven by a call for fairness and equity.

Both Testaments have plenty to say about economic oppression of the poor, wages, and systemic inequalities between the “haves” and the “have nots.” Beginning in the Pentateuch and continuing through the Prophets, the Old Testament gives a clear and consistent witness against such practices as poverty wages, wage theft, economic disparity, and the exploitation of those in need. For example, many texts offer protection for vulnerable populations – often described as “widows” and “orphans.” From Jesus to Paul to James, the New Testament witness is also very clear when it comes to respecting workers.

Recent economic analyses of the Roman Empire, which included the birthplace of Christianity, show that an estimated 55 to 68 percent of the populace lived at or below the subsistence level, with an additional one in four people being only just above the subsistence level (Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, 45-46). Even worse, the vast majority of the time, the religious, cultural, and legal context of the day favored the rich and helped keep the non-elite in poverty. Exploitation and oppression were tolerated. Therefore, when biblical writers from Old Testament prophets to followers of Jesus decry wage theft and speak against oppression, they challenge common and prevalent practices and stand in sharp contrast to the wider culture that condoned such conduct.

The following list of verses is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to demonstrate that God calls all Christians to help protect the least among us. In the biblical witness, we find the resources we need to support living wages and to fight injustices like wage theft and exploitation of the poor.

-Lee Foster, NC Council of Churches Intern

Except where noted, all verses from the New International Version. Commentary in italics.

Leviticus 19:13

Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.

Deuteronomy 24:14

Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.

Proverbs 13:23

An unplowed field produces food for the poor, but injustice sweeps it away.

Proverbs 30:14, NRSV

There are those whose teeth are swords, whose teeth are knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among mortals.

Isaiah 10:1-3

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?

Jeremiah 2:34

On your clothes is found the lifeblood of the innocent poor, though you did not catch them breaking in.

Jeremiah 5:28

Their evil deeds have no limit; they do not seek justice. They do not promote the case of the fatherless; they do not defend the just cause of the poor.

In this verse, “they” refers to the small upper class of society. The “fatherless” and the “poor” represent the least powerful in society. The judgment against the rich is not because they have more money, but because they do not act in a just manner.

Jeremiah 7:6-7, 9-10

If you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.... Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things?

These verses are illustrative for a few reasons. First, God tells the people that if they act justly by not oppressing the poor, then they will be allowed to live in the land in peace. The second half of this passage highlights the contradiction between how people actually live versus how they should live. It is similar to a business person acting unjustly at work then appearing at church on Sunday morning and pretending that there is nothing wrong with his or her behavior during the week.

Jeremiah 21:12

This is what the LORD says to you, house of David: Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed.

“House of David” refers to the royal, ruling house of the nation. Here the role of government is to help and protect the poor and other disadvantaged peoples from those that have power.

Jeremiah 22:3

This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

Jeremiah 22:13

Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor.

Biblical Passages in Support of Living Wages & Economic Justice

Jeremiah 22:16-17

“He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the LORD. “But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion.” *These verses set up a contrast between the former king, Josiah (“he”), and the current king (“you”). The former king is judged to have been righteous because he defended the poor and the needy, but the current king is rebuked for dishonest gain, oppression, extortion, and “shedding innocent blood.”*

Ezekiel 22:29

The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress.

Hosea 12:7

The merchant uses dishonest scales and loves to defraud. *This is not a condemnation of commerce as a whole, but rather the dishonest practices of those in the nation of Israel.*

Amos 2:7

They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. *This is an indictment against the nation of Israel for their ill-treatment of the poor and disadvantaged peoples.*

Amos 4:1

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, “Bring us some drinks!”

Amos 5:11-12

You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

Amos 5:15

Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.

Amos 8:4-6

Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, “When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?”—skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.

Micah 6:8

And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:10-11

Am I still to forget your ill-gotten treasures, you wicked house, and the short ephah, which is accursed? Shall I acquit someone with dishonest scales, with a bag of false weights? *“The short ephah” and “dishonest scales” here refers to the practice of deceitful merchants who would defraud buyers by cheating them. Money was weighed during this time, so if a merchant used*

a rigged scale, it would cost the buyer more to buy from them than it would to buy from an honest merchant.

Habakkuk 2:6

Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!

Habakkuk 2:9

Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin!

Zechariah 7:8-10

And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’”

Malachi 3:5

So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against...those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.

Matthew 6:24

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Matthew 10:10

Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts — no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave.

Luke 3:12-14

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely...”

Luke 10:7

When you enter a house, first say, “Peace to this house.” If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages.

Romans 4:4

Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.

1 Timothy 5:18

Scripture says, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.”

James 5:4

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

Theology of Living Wages

Background

The Oxford Dictionary defines theology as “The study of the nature of God and religious beliefs.” Christian traditions have used theology as a way to explore many ideas, practices and concerns. The word does not denote a small group of subjects, but rather all subjects, because God created all things. God should not be excluded from the conversations that communities have about living wages because God created people as social creatures. In being social, human beings develop economies, and that aspect of our existence - like all aspects - should be affected by our faith. Many theologians have used Scripture, reason, and worship to address living wages. Scattered throughout time and different economic atmospheres, the theologians below defend a just and living wage.

-Keith Gustine, NC Council of Churches Intern

Luther and Calvin Call for Justice

The two prominent Protestant Reformation theologians, Martin Luther of Germany and John Calvin from France, found that the call of the Christian to be a priest in every aspect of life included valuing common labor. Luther recognized the worth of labor when he wrote, “Many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another.”¹ Calvin too acknowledged that work of any kind honors God if done in love. For example Calvin is often attributed with having said, “There is no work, however vile or sordid, that does not glisten before God.” These theological statements indicate how all labor – and thus laborers – matter to God, thus heavily informing the question of fair wages.

The wages of laborers in their local markets concerned both leaders. Luther argued that, in the same way a just price should be paid for a product, “Even a farmhand must have food and pay for his labor. Who can serve or labor for nothing? The gospel says, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’”² Luther used the metaphor of a just and fair price, which should either be set by temporal authorities or, when such a rule does not exist, be supported by Christian conscience, to address fair wages.³

Calvin explicitly protected workers, especially the vulnerable ones who lived in constant necessity. In his sermon on Deuteronomy 24:14–18, Calvin condemned both the practice of underpaying and withholding pay. He wrote, “The rich... often spy for occasions and opportunities to cut down by half the wages of the poor people who need employment... When we use such hardness, even though we do not retain his salary, we are truly cruel and we defraud a poor man.”⁴ He continued by saying, “When the poor whom you have employed at work, and who put their work, their sweat, and their blood for you, have not been paid what is right, when you do not give them comfort and support; if they demand vengeance from God against you; who will be your lawyer or your advocate, so that you will be able to escape?”⁵ Through his preaching Calvin taught his flock

that employers who took advantage of their employees will ultimately stand before God with no way to hide the injustice of their action.

Luther and Calvin were concerned less with how Christians could get more money, but more with preventing greed. The discussion of fair wages in the Christian context during the Reformation had at the forefront the reality of sin in the economy, but with a positive outlook. Through contracts and salaries supported by Christian love and principalities, the sin of greed could be deterred, and workers as well as employers could be protected from each other and themselves.

Augustine’s Love and Wesley’s Justice

In Christian scripture and tradition, love and justice are central to any relationship. In their own times and places in history, both Augustine of Hippo and John Wesley demonstrated the Christian calling for living wages. Augustine focused on love, while Wesley showed the importance of justice and how justice leads to a proper relationship between employer and employee.

Augustine was a 4th century bishop in North Africa who emphasized the Christian ethic of love with the crucial distinction between enjoying and using. For Augustine, when we enjoy something, we love it for its own sake, and only God deserves to be enjoyed in this sense. All other things are to be used or loved because of God. Augustine’s explicit concern with wages revolved around honesty. Wages are considered fair as long as both the employee and the employer have refrained from fraud. Augustine’s ethic of love implicitly bolstered living wages, calling employers to love God in their actions towards their work force. “Using” people in this case does not entail abuse or advantage, but rather participation in what may be called worship, through community. If wages cannot reflect the communal nature of worship, than they do not meet Augustine’s criteria for how human beings should “use” one another.⁶

In John Wesley’s 18th century context, the Atlantic slave trade was operating and shipping millions of Africans to the plantations of the Americas. In his writings Wesley attacked the institution with a clear emphasis on the importance of Christian responsibility to neighbor. The basis of this assertion shows how Wesley’s theological emphasis relates to fair wages. He wrote, “If, therefore, you have any regard for justice, (to say nothing of mercy, nor of the revealed law of God), render unto all their due.”⁷ In other words, basic human decency requires that workers – even slaves – be paid fairly for their work. Wesley’s ideas about work and justice were revolutionary in his time and they continue to reverberate today. Wesley even criticized the buyers of products that depended on slave labor along with those who were directly involved. The kind of relationships that promote justice rely on love of God and respect of God’s law.

Augustine and Wesley indicated how love and justice lead to worshipful and wholesome relationships in society, which includes the relationship between the employers and employees. Since wages are a defining part of that relationship they must reflect these theological convictions to be considered fair and just.

1 Luther, *To the Christian Nobility Concerning the Reform of the Christian State*, 1520.

2 Luther, *Trade and Usury*, 1524

3 Ibid.

4 Calvin, Sermon 140, Deuteronomy 24:14–18

5 Calvin, Sermon 125, Deuteronomy 22:1–4

6 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*.

7 John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, XI:79.

Theology of Living Wages

Catholic Perspectives

In contemporary America the Catholic Church is a strong defender of laborers. For example, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Workers movement went to the poorest parts of the United States to fight for justice on behalf of the poor. Such action is supported by a robust theology providing guidance and support. St. Thomas Aquinas, Pope Leo XIII, and Dorothy Day herself provided a framework that shows the importance of living wages for Catholic communities.

Thomas Aquinas lived in the 13th century, and wrote on a wide variety of subjects in his *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas described society in terms of the “part” and the “whole,” and taught that because they are equal what belongs to the whole in some ways belongs to the part. Pope Leo XIII picked up Aquinas’ language in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* to show that the concerns of the poor stand equally with the concerns of all other parts of society.⁸ This is distributive justice, giving all people equal attention and regard. Neither of these theologians intended to dismantle private ownership, but both emphasized that those with capital should provide enough pay for those who are in the lower classes and performing manual labor. Fair wages, in short, reflect distributive justice.

Dorothy Day served as a Catholic lay-woman in 20th century United States. She kept many dairies and wrote several books. In her work she continually emphasized the plight of those who were marginalized by society. Since her death in 1980, the Catholic Workers movement has continued her work and her theological conviction that God cares especially about the poor. She responded to debilitating poverty by articulating a system called “Distributism.” Neither capitalism nor socialism, Distributism explicitly calls for wages to provide enough money to enable families to remain the central community for the individual person, rather than the corporation or the state.⁹ The family exists as God’s created order and Day argued that the centrality of the family strengthens society. When people become overworked and underpaid due to their relative weakness in the labor market, they are unable to provide for or spend time with family. Then the divinely-ordained centerpiece is lost. Living wages, then, support the family.

Dorothy Day leaned heavily upon both Aquinas and Leo XIII in her writings. This shows a continuity within the Catholic tradition that existed even before industrialization. The concern for justice, virtue and God’s desire for both to be defining characteristics of human society leads Catholics to stand for living wages.

Contemporary American Protestant Voices

In the United States, many Christian theologians have stood up for living wages and fairness for vulnerable communities. For example, theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch emphasized how the Christian church should challenge economic disparity and help its victims. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his life to showing how faith challenges racial division in society. Countless others, including Dorothy Day (mentioned above), lived and worked in the United States defending living wages.

In *The Historical Roots of Christianity*, Rauschenbusch - like King, a Baptist - argued that scripture defends the poor, and he specifically used the Hebrew Bible’s defense of wages as an example.¹⁰ Rauschenbusch was attuned to scripture, and like John Calvin he saw how Deuteronomy called for a fair wage in no uncertain terms. Laborers deserved their wages and a Sabbath, which meant they could only work so many hours. Rauschenbusch related the scripture to the push for a government protected eight-hour workday and weekends off. Giving a Sabbath refreshes the workers, and wages would have to be high enough to provide for the laborers and their families during these days of rest.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s career is best known for his calls for the end of racism and his non-violent approach. Yet he always saw the cause of the poor interlinked with his critique of racism. During the latter part of his life, King explicitly pushed for an attack on poverty with the Poor People’s Campaign. Seeing Vietnam drain the government’s budget, the civil rights leader asked for renewed diligence to provide proper jobs and wages to revitalize the American poor.¹¹ His theological defense for such a goal in part relied on his famous use of scripture. He often quoted Amos 5:24: “But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” He also reminded his followers that he was a servant of Jesus Christ in his defense of the poor. For him theology drove the call for fair wages and dignified jobs.

When King went to Memphis to support sanitation workers who went on strike for a fair wages, an assassin stole his life. It is not an accident that recent demonstrations for fair and living wages have been held on Martin Luther King Day. An American icon of justice and peace, King displayed the deep and theologically relevant nature of wages. Along with the countless voices in America that have cried out for proper relationships between worker and hirer, Rauschenbusch and King continue to provide a witness for why faith leads Christians towards a concern for living wages.

⁸ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html, accessed July 13, 2011.

⁹ Dorothy Day, *Articles of Distribution* – 2, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=160>, accessed July 13, 2011.

¹⁰ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*, Ed. Paul Rauschenbusch (Harper One: New York) 2007.

¹¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Time to Break Silence*, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/058.html> accessed July 13, 2011.

Denominational Statements in Support of Living Wages & Economic Justice

African Methodist Episcopal Church

The Mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed. At every level of the Connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the A.M.E. Church evolved; that is, to seek out and save the lost, and serve the needy through a continuing program of:

- preaching the gospel,
- feeding the hungry,
- clothing the naked,
- housing the homeless,
- cheering the fallen,
- providing jobs for the jobless,
- administering to the needs of those in prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, asylums and mental institutions, senior citizens' homes; caring for the sick, the shut-in, the mentally and socially disturbed, and
- encouraging thrift and economic advancement.

Official mission statement of the AME Church
Source: www.amec3000.org/mission.htm

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

Intelligent concern for the extension of The Kingdom of Heaven on earth calls for attention to social agitation. The Bible clearly teaches that rich and poor should dwell together in peace, for the Lord is the maker of them all. The arraying of capital against labor and the division of society into conflicting classes are to be deplored, and, as far as possible, prevented. The Church should emphasize the duty of mutual forbearance and charity. It should be her aim to exalt the dignity of labor and to sanctify wealth and culture. The ministers of the Lord's house ought to be of such a nature that lines of social distinction should disappear, and the wholesome truth be universally accepted that God is no respecter of persons.

Statement by the Committee on State of the Church, 1892
Source: www.amezqrhs.org/index_files/Page688.htm

Alliance of Baptists

Therefore, we join with our ecumenical partners in urging our local and state governments, the United States Congress and the Administration to:

1. Raise the minimum wage to a living wage.
2. Recognize the right of workers to organize for collective bargaining with employers regarding wages, benefits and working conditions.
3. Address fiscal problems in a way that safeguards assistance for impoverished and hungry families.
4. Protect and adequately fund programs that serve women and families—especially those struggling to overcome poverty—domestically and around the world.

5. Exempt domestic anti-poverty programs and poverty-focused humanitarian and development aid from cuts and multi-year spending caps. A strong precedent exists for protecting the poor in the context of deficit reduction by exempting such programs from cuts.

Statement approved by the Alliance of Baptists Convocation, April 30, 2011
Source: www.sitemason.com/files/k4BAo8/Economic%20Justice%202011.pdf

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

WHEREAS, a central act of God in the Hebrew Bible is to deliver people from slavery into freedom; and

WHEREAS, Jesus came to preach good news to all, with commitment to and compassion for the poor; and

WHEREAS, all economic systems are under God's judgment; and

WHEREAS, people working 40 hours a week should be able to provide food, clothing, shelter, and health care for themselves and their families; and

WHEREAS, it is morally unacceptable that thirty-five million people living in the United States (including twelve million children) struggle for existence under the federal poverty line; and

WHEREAS, national wage policies are moral documents that express the moral values of our country; and

WHEREAS, private and public economic enterprises are responsible for and need to be held accountable for the social costs of paying living wages as part of doing business; and

WHEREAS, some corporations seek to minimize labor costs, cut benefits, and seek the cheapest global labor pools as a way of maximizing profits;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Assembly meeting in Portland, Oregon July 23-27, 2005 resolve to address issues of workers' wages and dignity, Biblically and theologically; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) support national movements toward the passage of legislation that guarantees workers sufficient wages to supply adequate food, clothing, shelter, and health care for themselves and their families; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) support movements that address the living wage and cooperate with workers, employers, labor unions, and organizations that are working to affirm workers' dignity.

Statement approved by the General Assembly, 2005
Source: www.disciples.org/Portals/0/PDF/ga/pastassemblies/2005/resolutions/0517.pdf

Denominational Statements in Support of Living Wages & Economic Justice

Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

Economic Life

With full acknowledgment of stewardship under God and accountability to God, we stand for the acquisition of property by moral processes and the right to private ownership. We are thus obligated to evaluate each aspect of every economic order by the commands of Christ and judge its practices by the Christian gospel.

We believe that it is not only our duty to bring Christ to the individual, but also to bring the increasingly technological society in which we live more nearly into conformity with the teachings of Christ...

(c) Wages and Working Conditions. Free collective bargaining has proved its values in our free society whenever the parties engaged in collective bargaining have acted in good faith to reach equitable and moral solutions of problems dealing with wages and working conditions. We do not support the opinion voiced in some quarters that strikes should be made illegal. To declare strikes illegal would be to deprive workers of their right to collective action and, even more seriously, would place in the hands of government the power to force workers to remain on the job.

(d) Automation. Through automation, a greater number of people face job displacement, economic loss, and obsolescence of their skills. We affirm that it is a Christian duty to provide for all people opportunity to earn an adequate livelihood, to avoid unemployment and waste of personal and economic resources. We believe that workers who are displaced by automation should be given opportunity for retraining.

(e) Poverty and Unemployment. We believe that the economic development which makes possible material plenty for all imposes upon us great moral responsibility, since physical, emotional and spiritual development of millions of people throughout the world is hindered by poverty. We therefore stand for the eradication of poverty everywhere.

Statement from *The Social Creed of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, 1998*
Source: www.c-m-e.org/core/Social_Creed.htm

The Episcopal Church

Urge Bishops and Diocesan Leaders to Support the National Implementation of a Just Wage

Resolved, That the 73rd General Convention of the Episcopal Church urge Bishops and leaders within their dioceses actively to support the ongoing implementation of a living wage within the institutions of the church, as passed by the 1997 General Convention and continue to advocate the passage of living wage ordinances at all government levels.

Statement approved by the 73rd General Convention of the Episcopal Church
Source: www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2000-a081

Support Worker Unions and a Living Wage

Resolved, That the 75th General Convention support actively the right of workers to form a union, and increase the support in our cities and states for passage of "living wage" legislation; and be it further

Resolved, That the Convention commit the Church at all levels to contract solely with union hotels in its meetings, or to obtain confirmation that local prevailing "living wages" are paid by all hotels the Church uses; and be it further

Resolved, That the 75th General Convention strongly urge the Church Center staff and especially the General Convention Planning Office to assure that delegates that host events of The Episcopal Church comply with GC2003-A130 and provide a living wage for their employees...

Statement approved by the 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church
Source: www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2006-D047

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Economic Life: Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All

Economic life pervades our lives, the work we do, the income we receive, how much we consume and save, what we value, and how we view one another. An economy (*oikonomia* or "management of the household") is meant to meet people's material needs. The current market-based economy does that to an amazing degree; many are prospering as never before. At the same time, others continue to lack what they need for basic subsistence. Out of deep concern for those affected adversely, we of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America here assess economic life today in light of the moral imperative to seek sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all...

We commit ourselves as a church to:

- compensate all people we call or employ at an amount sufficient for them to live in dignity;
- provide adequate pension and health benefits, safe and healthy work conditions, sufficient periods of rest, vacation, and sabbatical, and family-friendly work schedules;
- cultivate workplaces of participatory decision-making;
- honor the right of employees to organize for the sake of better working conditions and for workers to make free and informed decisions; encourage those who engage in collective bargaining to commit themselves to negotiated settlements, especially when participatory attempts at just working conditions fail; and discourage the permanent replacement of striking workers.

We call for:

- other employers to engage in similar practices;
- government enforcement of regulations against discrimination, exploitative work conditions and labor practices (including child labor), and for the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively;
- public policies that ensure adequate social security, unemployment insurance, and health care coverage;
- a minimum wage level that balances employees' need for sufficient income with what would be significant negative

Denominational Statements in Support of Living Wages & Economic Justice

- effects on overall employment;
- tax credits and other means of supplementing the insufficient income of low-paid workers in order to move them out of poverty.

“Sufficiency” means adequate access to income and other resources that enable people to meet their basic needs, including nutrition, clothing, housing, health care, personal development, and participation in community with dignity...

In the United States, people’s worth and value tend to be measured by the size of their income and wealth. If judged by their multimillion dollar compensations, top corporate officers and sports superstars would seem to be the most highly valued in our society. Enormous disparities between their compensations and the average wages of workers are scandalous...

We are sent forth into the world to bear witness to God’s promised reign. The world is the whole household of God that economic life is intended to serve. The Spirit of God expands our vision and transforms our priorities. We realize that we do not eat alone; everyone needs to eat. The multitudes present around God’s global table become our neighbors rather than competitors or strangers. Empowered by God, we continue to act, pray, and hope that through economic life there truly will be sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all.

Adopted as a social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by its sixth Churchwide Assembly, August 20, 1999
Source: www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Economic-Life.aspx

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Resolution on Just Globalization: Justice, Ownership, and Accountability

In order to protect workers and financial systems at home and abroad, again through the appropriate agencies of the church:

1. Urge United States government agencies and authorities to increase the minimum wage toward a living wage and enforce minimum wage laws, worker safety regulations, and rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively, in accordance with longtime General Assembly support for such measures, and support the inclusion of similar worker safeguards within all of U.S. bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, as is already the case in European Union trade agreements.
2. Urge U.S. agencies and representatives, as well as individuals and congregations, to engage in efforts to end the sinful exploitation of people, especially children and women throughout the world by forced labor, inhumane working conditions, drug trafficking, prostitution, and other forms of involuntary servitude and degradation.
3. Express continuing concern for social inequities in the current U.S. income tax system and support for equity-based reforms, consistent with previous General Assembly policies (1977, etc.).

Approved by the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2006
Source: www.oga.pcusa.org/publications/resolution-on-just-globalization.pdf

Reformed Church in America

Background from the 2007 Report from Commission on Christian Action to General Synod

No dimension of human experience is exempt and free to chart its own path...This means, obviously, that economic life can be autonomous only in rebellion and that the American Way of Life, like every other established order, is to be judged by the degree of its conformity with the kingdom of God, never confusing the one with the other (MGS 1984, p. 52).

As a church that follows Jesus Christ, and as one that reads God’s Word through a Reformed lens, the Reformed Church in America has a special call to social justice. The RCA takes very seriously the sovereignty of God and that means assessing all aspects of individual and communal life in light of God’s reign. Other than the pervasiveness of the Holy Spirit, there is nothing in our communal life more pervasive than the economic dimension. The church needs to constantly be addressing the economic dimension as it is both the most threatening challenge to the reign of God on earth and simultaneously the dimension that has great potential to lead to positive communal changes within the reign of God.

The 1984 paper “Biblical Faith and Our Economic Life” states well the two sides of the economic “coin.” On the positive side, “the God who created us gave us a world full of many things to enjoy. The world is not only beautiful, to express God’s glory and give us aesthetic delight; it is also useful, to express his generosity and give us the material satisfaction of food and drink, clothing and shelter, etc. Righteousness and prosperity belong together” (MGS 1984, p. 53). On the negative side, our economic life leads to wealth and the desire for wealth, and both are extremely dangerous. Jesus addresses wealth repeatedly, saying things like, “you cannot serve God and wealth,” and “how hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Lk. 16:13, 18:24-25)...

Whatever economic system holds sway over a nation, Christians must demand that it be just. Workers deserve to make a wage that allows them the material satisfaction of food and drink, clothing and shelter, and aesthetic delight. Raising the federal minimum wage would be a start toward a more just economic structure.

The RCA, though small, can and should influence the government in regard to minimum wage. There is a way to join our voices with the wider church to ensure that the Congress hears the voice of those who believe in God’s reign over our economic lives—the Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign...

Injustice runs deep in our economic system. Raising the federal minimum wage or raising state minimums will not curb all injustice. For instance, billion dollar corporations are increasing the number of part-time workers to avoid having to provide required health care benefits for full-time workers. However, an increase of the federal minimum wage will immediately positively impact the lives of some 10 million American workers who earn the minimum wage, and it will, of course, impact their families as well.

Denominational Statements in Support of Living Wages & Economic Justice

Adopted Resolutions

To encourage congregations to join the Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign and to visit the website regularly for updates on current legislation, both federal and state, and on actions proposed for churches by the campaign organizers.

To encourage congregants in RCA churches to contact senators from their states, asking that they accept the proposed increase in the minimum wage recently passed by the U.S. House of Representatives.

To call RCA employers to review the compensation packages they offer their employees with an aim to provide a just living wage, and to assign the Commission on Christian Action to survey RCA congregations regarding compensation for employees other than ministers of Word and sacrament, providing a report in light of a living wage no later than General Synod 2010.

Approved by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, 2007
Source: <http://images.rca.org/docs/witness/MinimumWage2007.pdf>

United Church of Christ

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the United Church of Christ in all its settings will work to make our culture reflect the following values:

- that societies and nations are judged by the way they care for their most vulnerable citizens;
- that government policy and services are central to serving the common good;
- that the sum total of individual choices in any private marketplace does not necessarily constitute the public good;
- that paying taxes for government services is a civic responsibility of individuals and businesses;
- that the tax code should be progressive, with the heaviest burden on those with the greatest financial means;
- that the integrity of creation and the health and sustainability of ecological systems is the necessary foundation for the well-being of all people and all living things for all time.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the United Church of Christ in all its settings will engage in study, reflection, and prayer to learn about these issues and the consequences of current trends to future generations to discern God's call.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the United Church of Christ in all its settings will do justice and promote the common good by working actively to ensure full employment, dignity on the job, living wages, and sufficient income for everyone.

Statement approved by the 25th General Synod, 2005
Source: www.ucc.org/justice/worker-justice/jlowwage.html

United Methodist Church

¶ 163 C) Work and Leisure—Every person has the right to a job at a living wage. Where the private sector cannot or does not provide jobs for all who seek and need them, it is the responsibility of government to provide for the creation of such jobs. We support social measures that ensure the physical and men-

tal safety of workers, that provide for the equitable division of products and services, and that encourage an increasing freedom in the way individuals may use their leisure time.

We recognize the opportunity leisure provides for creative contributions to society and encourage methods that allow workers additional blocks of discretionary time. We support educational, cultural, and recreational outlets that enhance the use of such time. We believe that persons come before profits. We deplore the selfish spirit that often pervades our economic life.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008
Source: www.umc.org/site/apps/nl/newsletter.asp?c=hwL4KnN1LH&b=5066261

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

We believe that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision of society.

We believe in the sanctity of human life, and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching.

We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

We believe that the person is not only sacred but also social and that people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor.

We believe that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met.

We believe that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. Our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor first.

We believe that the economy must serve people, and if the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected, such as the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

We believe that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences.

We believe that we show respect for our Creator by our stewardship of creation and that we are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation.

Statement approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1999
Source: www.dioceseofraleigh.org/what/life