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“An Ethic of the Common Good”: Advocacy for a Living Wage

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Comments made during a forum on Seattle raising the minimum wage to \$15/hour hosted by St. Andrew’s Episcopal’s One World Social Justice Ministry.

I read yesterday that the mayors of our nation’s leading cities gathered at a meeting of the U.S. Mayor’s Conference this past weekend, and that “the subject of *income inequality* seemed to be on almost everyone’s lips” there in Dallas, the conference site. But it’s probably safe to say that just about everyone here tonight likewise recognizes that we have a *huge and growing problem* in this country. For the bottom has been falling out of much of the middle class.

Over a year ago I participated in a worker-led protest at SeaTac International Airport in support of contracted-out airport workers such as baggage handlers, wheelchair attendants and cabin cleaners. Socrates, an employee of Menzies Aviation, told the rally that he had been working there for an hourly rate of \$9.25 for five years;-- and after five years, they gave him a raise—of \$0.25 cents an hour, for which he was supposed to be grateful.

Present also at this same rally was the Rev. Jan Bolerjack, a Methodist minister, who got involved after she discovered that many airport workers were coming to the food bank at her Riverton church. And make no mistake: a surprising number of folks in our well-off churches in *this* part of Seattle may have joined the long-term unemployment ranks.

So why are churches and mosques involved in this advocacy for low wage workers? Not very many are yet, but we in the faith community need “*the urgency of now*” to recognize the depths of the problem in our city and nation. In this church every Sunday we have a set phrase in our prayers, where we pray “for all who work, that they may have dignity, respect, and a living wage.”

But words are cheap, even words of prayer.

We need to revive an ethic that was once fairly visible in our American life, if not widely practiced: *an ethic of the common good*.

In an *ethic of the common good*, we work towards a community in which all are respected; all are accorded real dignity; respect on the job, and a wage that permits a standard of living where families no longer have to trade off food with paying the rent or the cost of medicine.

And with an ethic of the common good,--and with its application to real living wage principles--there is no such thing as a "Yes, But" . There is only a YES--as a response to the ethic of the common good.

Tonight's conversation will hopefully be about how *together*--community, workers, business, government and faith leaders--how *together* we can best promote that good for all in our community.