

## **Partnering for Economic Justice: Where Do We Go From Here?**

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First Parish Church, Duxbury, MA  
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Good morning.

I'm so honored to be here with you on this very special day.

As we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, and just days before the inauguration of America's first black president, today is also known as Let Justice Roll's Living Wage Sunday. As part of this nation-wide weekend, we join thousands of UUs and millions in other faith communities that are holding services focused on economic justice.

This is a huge moment of change for our country and indeed our world. And it's a perfect time to think deeply about what economic justice is -- what it means in real life terms, and what it looks like around the world.

To help us think about economic justice in these wider terms, I'd like to share some stories from our work with UUSC's partners. In these "eye to eye" relationships, I've come to understand more about what our economic challenges are, and what works to support long term change toward liveable wages and dignified livelihoods. I'll end by suggesting how you can get involved in this economic justice movement, in ways that build on the work already taking place here at First Parish.

There are so many partner stories that I'd like to share, but as tomorrow marks the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of a leader born, nurtured and comforted in Atlanta, let us start in Georgia.

Last September I traveled with UUSC Program Director Atema Eclai to Sumter County in Georgia's southwest corner. Sumter County residents have some of the lowest median incomes in all of Georgia.

We arrived just before harvest season to visit the *Southern Alternatives Agricultural Cooperative* – the only African-American and woman-owned pecan processing cooperative in the United States. Our hosts were co-op founders, Carrie Thomas, Gussie Bess and Ruby Hawkins, three remarkable women who carry on Dr. King's legacy with great courage and spirit.

Local communities in Southern Georgia are tightly knit networks of support and accountability. This became clear during our time at the pecan plant as we learned that Carrie, Gussie and Ruby were all related directly and indirectly through blood and marriage.

During our time with the team, Atema and I learned that this pecan plant was just one aspect of the economic justice work anchoring this rural community. After a tour of the pecan production facilities and its work stations that provide jobs and hope for African-American families, we packed ourselves in the car to visit the Smithville Freedom Center about 12 miles down the road.

As we left the quiet factory, I imagined the hustle that would be taking place in just two weeks as truckloads of ripe pecans were delivered by African-American farmers whose small crops wouldn't otherwise find such a receptive market.

As we drove, we traveled rural highways that parted acres of crops as far as the eye could see. These were some of the lushest fields I'd ever seen -- cotton, sorghum, tobacco, and peanuts.

Who owns that land, and who reaps the profits from those commodities is a story for another time. It's a story of the systematic marginalization of black farmers and the consolidation of agriculture in the South – but it was becoming clear that living wage jobs for people in this rural community were limited and that creating alternative livelihoods was necessary for survival.

At the outskirts of the tiny township of Smithville, we pulled up to a local lunch place to grab a bite to eat. Aunt Dot's is the source of some of the best southern cooking in all of Sumter County.

The little restaurant was started as a way to earn a living by Aunt Dot herself, who presides over the pristinely clean kitchen trailer at the center of the village. The innovative Aunt Dot, it turns out, was Carrie's aunt, another sign of the mutuality and interdependence within this local economy. Over a meal of baked chicken, rutabaga, collards and sweet tea, Carrie shared the story of how the pecan plant came to life.

In 2004, when the *Federation of Southern Cooperatives* and the *Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative* wanted to develop local enterprises that could provide good jobs, they approached Carrie to start and run the plant. At that time, Carrie and her team knew nothing about pecan processing, maintaining equipment, and building sales and inventory systems.

But Carrie knew her community, and how to get things done.

In earlier years, as a home-health care nurse, Carrie founded the Smithville Freedom Center to provide the only afterschool and summer activities for African-American children, programs and services for the elderly, and a prison ministry and court-watch program.

Starting the Freedom Center in 1999 was no small task. Just ten years ago, African-Americans in Sumter County were still being subject to harassment and arrest by rogue policemen, and routinely denied legal counsel. The very existence of the Smithville Center threatened the balance of power and Carrie and others were arrested, jailed, tried and acquitted all during the course of their activism. However, with a lot of determination, courage and resiliency, both the Freedom Center and the Pecan Cooperative got up and running.

Right now, Southern Alternatives is improving their business systems and training workers through a UUSC Small Farmer Fund grant – which is collected through UU participation in the Coffee Project – a collaboration between UUSC, Equal Exchange, and UU congregations.

We're also helping Southern Alternatives to expand their customer base and product lines by promoting their pecans and sharing their story. This past December our Volunteer Network helped offer holiday pecan candies and fair trade pecans to UU congregations. This pilot project increased sales by 10% and the potential for growth is huge.

I share the Southern Alternatives story with you today because it shows what happens when a small group of people expand their vision of justice.

It is a story about facing economic crisis together.

And it shows the power of “eye to eye” partnership.

This, of course, is not an unfamiliar story here in Duxbury.

The faith and work of Carrie, Gussie and Ruby is very much alive here at First Parish in your support of the Box Project, the Soup Kitchen and the Community Partnership Group. It's alive in the ongoing public vigils you conduct, in rain or shine, to achieve peaceful solutions to end the war in Iraq. In these relational efforts and the courage to expand them, we chart a course that enriches us morally, spiritually, and sometimes, even materially.

Dr. King speaks to this mutuality in his final book, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" He writes:

"The universe is so instructed that things go awry if men are not diligent in their cultivation of the other-regarding dimension.  
"I" cannot reach fulfillment without "thou". The self cannot be self without other selves. Self-concern without other-concern is like a tributary that has no outward flow to the ocean...When men and governments work devotedly for the good of others, they achieve their own enrichment in the process."

King's message reminds us that economics is not an abstract, inanimate or impersonal concept. It is not a construct of law, or a calculation of finance. Rather, 'economics' is highly personal – it's a web of relationships, of individuals to one another, to our communities, and to the natural world on which we depend. Economics is the material embodiment of the spirit and character of those relationships.

Chuck Matthei<sup>1</sup>, former president of the Institute for Community Economics wrote eloquently that:

"As often as economic issues occupy our personal thoughts or dominate public discourse, the subject of "economics" remains confusing and even intimidating to many people. It seems to be vast, highly technical, and quite impersonal—yet we are each so profoundly affected by its realities.... Many of the economic problems confronting us can be understood as the result of neglected or broken relationships."

In these times, our "economic" brokenness has never been more apparent. And Dr. King's query "Where Do we Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" captures a question burning in many of our minds today.

In this economic crisis, many of us are feeling great anxiety, insecurity and loss. Some of us have lost jobs, taken salary cuts or are worried about layoffs. We're redoing our budgets and deciding on what we can do without. We're coping with the prospect or reality of losing homes, our savings, our healthcare.

I feel this anxiety too, and I witness it in the struggles of our partners. The painful experience of insecurity and vulnerability connects us profoundly with the experience of millions of workers around the world. A quick sketch of the global economy, translated in terms of working people's lives shows us this:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.equitytrust.org/Econ1.html>

- 1.4 billion people live in extreme poverty, earning less than the equivalent of \$1.25 per day. Most of these people cannot meet basic human needs for food, water, shelter, sanitation and healthcare.
- Current data estimates that there are over 280 million child workers in the world, a number roughly equivalent to the entire population of the United States.
- Informal economy jobs – those not covered by legal or social protections - are growing all around the world, from Africa to Southeast Asia, in Central America and in the booming economies of India and China – and yes, here in shifting economy of the United States.
- In the US, one of the most prosperous countries that the world has ever known, the wealth gap is growing – creating what the United Nations recently called a “social ticking time bomb.” In an October survey of 120 major world cities around the world, New York was found to be the ninth most unequal -- and Atlanta, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Miami had similar inequality levels to those of Nairobi and Abidjan.
- Finally, using the human development index that measures indicators like health, education and gender equity as a broader measure of well-being, the US scores just above Cuba in life expectancy, just below Kazakhstan in terms of educational enrollment, and in terms of gender disparities in economic attainment, the US ranks 106 out of 156, just below the United Arab Emirates, and slightly above Bangladesh and Zimbabwe.

As you can see, the situation for the worlds’ workers is highly precarious, yet around the globe, people are drawing upon their courage, adaptiveness and innovation to improve their livelihoods and their communities.

Here is one more example:

In Nairobi, Kenya, a group of teachers are changing the lives of street children in some of East Africa’s poorest neighborhoods. The Rock Women Group support street children by providing wrap-around supports to child workers, including training in safe, sustainable trades, and access to education in alternative schools.

The Rock Women started as a prayer group of primary school teachers supporting each other in face of the harsh realities of their classrooms. Slowly, they raised money by buying and renting out plastic chairs for community events. Over the years, they developed a unique approach that combines education and work-supports to stem the loss of so many students to unsafe child labor jobs like gravel-making, metal-picking and worse.

With UUSC support, the Rock Women teach, train and organize girl workers who are often heads-of-households with younger siblings to care for. They also tackle injustice at the policy level by advocating for the recognition of children’s rights in labor policy.

Our partners, like Southern Alternatives and the Rock Women give us an extraordinary window on the world, providing perspective and models of change that put resiliency, interdependence, and collaboration at the heart.

Dr. King reminds us that:

“All men are interdependent...When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge which is provided for us by a Pacific Islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a European. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs we are already beholden to more than half of the world.”

Dr. King’s statement helps us understand how we’re connected to people by the items we buy and the services we enjoy.

Despite a discourse of our “economy” as assets and expenses, mortgage-backed securities, credit swaps, and Ponzi schemes, economics is at its root a very personal and fundamentally moral discipline. It is nothing short of the web of our material relationships with one another and with the natural environment.

Economics and economic justice is in the jeans we wear, the coffee we drink and the chicken nuggets that are my daughter’s favorite food.

If we accept that many of the economic problems confronting us can be understood as the result of neglected or broken relationships, then working for economic justice is about understanding those divisions, repairing them, and building an ever-widening circle of new relationships that reflect our moral values.

So where *do* we go from here? First we begin by deepening our understanding and engagement within the web of relationships in our own communities. First Parish is already exploring this through your social justice projects on the South Shore. Secondly, we begin to expand our circle of relationships into wider partnerships and arenas.

Toward this end, I invite you to join thousands of UU and other congregations across the country in *Let Justice Roll*’s campaign that calls for raising the federal minimum wage to \$10 by 2010.

Exactly three years ago, on Martin Luther King Sunday in 2006, UUSC and the UUA hosted the very first *Let Justice Roll* Living Wage Sunday with Senator Edward Kennedy, at United First Parish UU in Quincy, MA.

Throughout that year, UUs played a critical role in securing sweeping victories in all 6 states where raising the minimum wage was on the mid-term ballot, clearing the way for the first federal minimum wage increase in over 10 years on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

And last June at General Assembly in Florida, delegates passed an Action of Immediate Witness in continued support of *Let Justice Roll* and the next phase of its work – a faith-based sign on letter in support of the \$10 in 2010 campaign.

We *cannot* let our current anxieties take raising wages off the table. Let us remember that the federal minimum wage was first established as a response to the Great Depression when the unemployment rate was 19 percent. In 1938, President Roosevelt saw the minimum wage as "an essential part of economic recovery" that stimulated the economy and job creation by increasing consumer purchasing power. The same is true today.

With us here this morning is an important woman for you to know, UUSC's Campaign Manager, Nichole Cirillo. Nichole is a remarkable woman in her own right and she is moving mountains for UUSC and our partners. She can tell you just what you need to do to get involved, so please look for her after the service.

The 10 in 10 campaign is just one activity that we can work on together. In economic justice we're bringing fair trade alive through intergenerational activities such as Reverse Trick-or-Treating, the Coffee Project, and collaborations with our Small Farmer Fund Partners.

If you're not already a member of UUSC, please join us. We'll help expand that circle of relationships and connect you with some of the most pressing human rights issues of our times. You'll meet partners who are leading this change, and discover ways to join them.

Through his faith, courage and wisdom, Dr. King moved an entire nation.

He preached the gospel of brotherhood, of equality and justice – and there's a lot of discussion these days about how Dr. King's life and legacy live in us today.

He lives in the courageous work of Carrie and Gussie and Ruby.

He lives in the loving leadership of the Rock Women Group.

And he lives here, in the faithful service of your social justice efforts.

Thank you for your generous invitation to be here with you today.

May we draw inspiration and energy from one another and continue to create a space for learning and justice in our lives, our workplaces, and in our communities,

*Amen.*

