

## Why No Living Wage?

General Assembly 2000 Event 459

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When I got home from my vacation last week, I found in my mail amongst the bills and twelve offers for new credit cards and twenty-seven request for money for good causes including this letter. It read:

Every Fall, hundreds of school children in Montgomery County go off to school without the supplies they need. They don't have notebooks, crayons, pencils, scissors, or backpacks.

Another paragraph read:

Maybe not having school supplies doesn't seem like such a terrible hardship. But take a moment to think back to your own childhood. Remember how excited you were to pick out your supplies, making sure to get just the right color of notebook...

Further down:

Now picture the hurt on a child's face when she learns that she's somehow different from the other kids-when she learns that she is "poor."

It went on a little later:

If you can spare \$25 or more, you can make a big difference in a child's life right here in Montgomery County. You can spare her needless pain and bolster her self-confidence.

When you leave this sanctuary this morning you will have the opportunity to give money to the Community Ministries of Montgomery County so school supplies can be provided for children in Montgomery County. I encourage everyone present to contribute generously or bring school supplies next week. I have a check here for \$25, which I will be placing in that box. But I want to tell you, it makes me MAD. It makes me not just sad but ANGRY that one of the richest counties in the richest country on this earth cannot out of our tax dollars provide pencils and scissors for school children. I think that little girl the Community Ministries was talking about is still going to know she is "poor" because her school supplies come from charity rather than from her family. She will be expected to be grateful for someone else's generosity. It makes me angry that some adults working full-time are not paid enough to be able to go with their children to Walmart or Staples or CVS and buy expected school supplies for their children. Giving school supplies will solve that little girl's immediate problem, but we won't have solved it for all the children next year and the year after that.

There is another red flag flying for me with this school supplies project. It is a worry about how we are with each other here at River Road. The school supplies project is sponsored by our Economic Justice Task Force. This is the same church social justice task force which two months ago at our annual congregational meeting presented a resolution to support "the living wage" for employees and those in contracts with Montgomery County, the State of Maryland and River Road Unitarian Church itself. The living wage resolution was tabled at the congregational meeting.

A member of that Economic Justice Task Force said to me last week, "We had no idea we would open up such a can of worms. Now, we decided to try something safe, like school supplies, something that everyone could agree upon." I had the feeling she was being a bit sarcastic, but she was also disappointed and felt like they just didn't want to cause any more trouble.

My concern is that the fear of controversy may discourage the Economic Justice Task Force from focusing on social change. Generous acts of charity are extremely important. They enable people to survive. But the only way they will become more than band-aids is if our engagement in them motivates us to seek social change.

Social change cannot happen by giving people something. It happens by changing ourselves, our world and the way we are with each other.

I know that if you and I don't pay enough for the services and goods which we use, to allow the people who provide them to make enough to feed and house their families, then children in this country are going hungry so I can buy organic food at Fresh Fields; New Balance running shoes; vacation on the Hatteras beaches; go to plays at the Studio Theater; have a garbage disposal and computers in my home and school supplies for my children.

Our denomination recognizes social change as an important issue. The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) is in the second year of a study action issue on economic injustice, poverty and racism. Our General Assembly this year adopted a new study/action issue on responsible consumption (what I call the privileged side of poverty). As a congregation we need to engage in these studies.

So why are we Unitarian Universalists interested in social change? We come here seeking a religious community. We come here seeking a wholeness, which we can't find sitting at home or even walking in the woods. We come for the strength, affirmation and security which community gives us. That strength turns inward to support and nurture us individually and it stretches us outward to care for the immediate needs of the world's people and to be able to change the world.

For instance, we have a pastoral care team which is there for us if our spouse decides to walk out, or our mother gets sick, or our house hasn't sold, or maybe it has sold and where do we go, our children are seriously ill or we fall and break a bone.

As well as being a friendly and caring church we have a reputation for being a church with a strong social justice program. During our last pledge drive, we raised \$47,000 to be spent on social justice projects only. We raised that money separately so that if there are struggles with adopting the general budget we are not asked to cut our contributions to social justice. We cheer our youth and adults who march for AIDS research, rebuild burned churches, build houses, support health clinics for Central American immigrants, create scholarships for students of color, stand up for the rights of gay and lesbian people, buy tractors for farmers in Romania, feed people at Shepherds Table, collect money for the Montgomery County Food Bank. We are proud of our role in social justice.

On June 6 of this year at the annual congregational meeting, the Economic Justice Task Force presented a resolution to support adopting living wage statues in Montgomery County and in the State of Maryland and asking River Road to comply also. It would have required a minimum hourly pay rate of \$7.50 an hour plus health insurance or \$10.50 an hour without health insurance. That is either \$15,000 or \$21,000 a year before Social Security, Medicare and income tax are taken out of the salary. The motion was tabled.

I was startled. I felt sad and disappointed. I thought those of us in support of the living wage hadn't done our homework. We hadn't educated enough. Churches like the Allegheny UU Church of Pittsburg had taken a congregational stand on the living wage. Why couldn't we?

It seemed to me that the strongest argument for tabling came from those of us who said, "this is too controversial an issue." And "this is a partisan issue in which a church shouldn't get involved."

It was a controversial issue because not everyone in the church did agree with supporting the living wage concept. There are other compassionate and reasonable ways to address this issue.

It was a controversial issue because not everyone in the congregation would think that RRUC should get involved in political issues.

I suspect the Economic Justice Task Force thought this issue might involve some controversy. That was why they wanted to educate the congregation and give it a chance to discuss the issue in the newsletter, at CC&C, our Coffee, Conversation and Controversy forum, in another congregational forum and at that congregational meeting.

I think one of our biggest obstacles to social change is our fear of controversy. We want our own views to be respected, not demeaned. We don't want to hurt anyone else's feelings by our ideas or our words. (When I lived in Minneapolis, we called this "Minnesota nice".) We don't want to feel uncomfortable. All those feelings come out of thinking of controversy as a battle to be won. I suggest we think of controversy as a puzzle to be solved. It takes all our ideas as different as they may be to put the pieces

together. Our opinions may be like the pieces of a puzzle. We may pick them up and turn them around and turn them around again. When they fit together we have come up with something stronger, better—something worth creating.

I began examining how, I thought, RRUC and the UUA dealt with controversial issues—especially in light of our support for diversity of thought and our support for the individual.

AT RRUC we usually deal with controversial issues by encouraging those who want to raise money and volunteer hours for a social justice cause to do just that and to speak in the name of their specific social justice task force. We have a Racial Justice, Partner Church, Central America, Children's Rights, Peace and Conflict Resolution, Economic Justice, Affordable Housing, Friends in Action, Environmental, Middle-East, Open Church, and Beacon House Task Force.

When these task forces speak in public, they speak for themselves as a group affiliated with the River Road Unitarian Church. When they walk in a protest or parade for their specific issue they are identified as a specific group from RRUC. We protect individual diversity by rarely speaking in concert for the entire congregation. This process also enables much more action to take place, because the task forces don't have to come to the congregation for an endorsement on each of their studies and positions.

When do we act differently? What controversial issues have been so important that the congregation spoke as a body for a social justice issue? What issues are so important to us that we would choose to speak or act as a congregation, even if we speak or act in opposition to the opinions or beliefs of some of our people?

I find myself frequently describing Unitarian Universalism as a denomination whose values and ethics are exemplified in the social justice stands we have taken especially in racial justice, women's rights and gay and lesbian rights. It is here where we "affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all; engage in the search for meaning and truth and realize the interconnectedness of all existence."

Historically, some Unitarian and Universalist churches took congregational stands on slavery, on abolition. Yet some churches fired their ministers because they attacked slavery from the pulpits or were actively engaged in the Underground Railroad. The Universalists took a denominational stand against slavery, and the denomination split, loosing all its Southern churches.

As a denomination the Unitarians never took a stand. (Notice I am talking separately about the Unitarians and the Universalists because they didn't merge into the Unitarian Universalist Association until about a hundred years after the Civil War.) Abolition created an economic threat to many of the cotton mill owners of New England, who were members of Unitarian churches. If a church wanted to participate in the Underground Railroad (and we speak proudly of churches, like the one in Rochester, NY, which did.), they were choosing to break the U.S. Fugitive Slave Law. Can you imagine how hard it

would be for any congregation to vote to intentionally break the law of the land? Only a few did. It was not easy in the mid-1800s to take a stand against slavery. It was very controversial. And yet, some in our religious tradition were courageous enough to take those stands and they were involved in forever changing the shape of this country.

What does our history look like concerning women's rights? This spring the Unitarian Universalist Association became the first denomination to have more women clergy than men. It wasn't always so. In 1870, we had five women ministers among six hundred men ministers. In 1890 we had about seventy women ministers. By the early 1900s leadership in the American Unitarian Association (AUA) had virtually eliminated the possibility of women ministers being settled in Unitarian Churches. The head of the AUA let it be known that he was opposed to women's suffrage. It would not be until the 1960s and 70's that we would see women actively being welcomed into the ministry in any numbers in Unitarian Universalists churches. It has taken us a long time to develop a denomination in which it is just as ordinary for a woman to be a minister as a man.

An area in which RRUC has taken a congregational stand is in supporting human rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. We have done this after years of conversation as a denomination and as a congregation. We addressed our fears; spoke them out loud; addressed them again and spoke more of them out loud. We held Sunday morning services. Our minister and our director of religious education spoke in support. Our Board of Trustees spoke out in support. We voted as a congregation to be intentionally welcoming to gay and lesbian people.

And then as a congregation we voted to call an openly gay minister. It was a controversial act. It was an act with political ramifications. Not everyone in our congregation agreed with this decision. A few asked that their names be taken off our membership roles because of this position, but only a few. Just one year later it seems the fact that our minister is gay is no issue at all.

So is the living wage an important enough issue to engage the congregation in years of educating and dialogue? Is the living wage too specific an issue? What I believe wholeheartedly is that POVERTY in the United States is a religious and ethical issue, which threatens the very essence of the way we live. Poverty shatters the worth and dignity of our people.

Now we may be able to address poverty through our Economic Justice Task Force speaking for themselves. But I don't think so. We must realize that the playing field of social justice is changing in this country. There is a radical change in our society's expectation about the role and responsibility of religious institutions in our society. The concept of separation of church and state is getting even more fuzzy.

George W. Bush, the leading Republican candidate for the U.S. Presidency, said on July 22nd of this year the federal government's role is not to help the needy directly. Rather:

...in every instance when my administration sees a responsibility to help people, we will look first to faith-based institutions

Society's expectations are changing.

Today, our federal government IS contracting with churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious institutions to provide social services. The federal government is hiring faith-based institutions to run federally funded day care programs for children and for senior citizens. Leaders of our major political parties have said they expect faith-based institutions to pick up some of the needs created by the welfare reform happening today. Surely we must be expected to be involved in shaping the policies as well as providing the direct services.

Does that mean RRUC should endorse the concept of the living wage? I wanted us to endorse the living wage. I thought it was a viable way to address poverty. It was an idea about which action was going to be taken. I don't think it is the only way. We might be able to adopt a tax structure, which could equally address this issue. But at the time the living wage was before our politicians. And politicians in this country listen to churches. They listen to churches more than they listen to individual people. I hope RRUC will intentionally work to eliminate the injustice caused by poverty. I don't want controversy to scare us from exploring and acting on this issue. We cannot be like Buddha's parents. We cannot shield our children or ourselves from the pains of the world. Facing it and talking about it and finding ways to change it is what we should be modeling for our children.

Making the world a better place is a way of giving thanks. It is a way of being grateful for our existence. If we genuinely recognize that we are trying to make changes for the better, our diversity and the controversy it creates will make us all wiser and our final choices more enlightened. Let us have the courage to try for social change, even when we are not sure of all the ramifications. No one has ever been totally sure.

I received a note from one of the oldest members of our congregation, who is quite ill. He was a prosecutor in the Nuremberg trials and he sent the chapter of his book on those trials, which dealt with the way the Nazis silenced churches so there was no one to deal with controversy. He knows the value in churches speaking out.

I received a voice mail message from a member of the congregation who was vacationing in San Diego saying how happy she was that I was preaching on this important topic and wishing me good luck.

If you notice the order of service, you will see a quote from our hymnal by Universalist minister Hosea Ballou. Pam Kempf, our administrative assistant, said there was room so she put it there in hopes that people would be generous with different ideas this morning.

The good will of these people and people like them will be with us as we face controversy. We must not let it stop our work for social justice. The injustice of poverty

is shattering the lives of people. We can stop some of that violence. Together walking through the maze of controversy we can make a path. I really believe we can. May it be so.

***Resolution Presented by the Social Justice Council  
June 6, 1999***

**Resolve**

That the congregation of River Road Unitarian Church wishes to go on record as supporting the adoption in Montgomery County and in the State of Maryland of "Living Wage" statutes, under which private entities receiving public money from the County or State, as the case may be, under contracts or subsidies would be required to pay each of their employees a "living wage".

The congregation also supports that its own expenses should be governed by "living wage" requirements, for its own employees, and for contractors, to the extent practically feasible and insofar as can be determined without undue difficulty.

It is understood that "living wage" is defined for the present purposes as a minimum hourly pay in the range of \$10.40 to \$10.50 at the present time. (It was announced at the meeting that an hourly rate of \$7.50 plus health benefits was also considered a "living wage." (That equals \$21,000 or \$1,750 per month without health insurance or \$15,000 or \$1,250 per month with health insurance. And of course we are not talking about take-home pay here. Social security, medicare and income tax would still have to come out of this salary.)