

## *Excerpts from ‘Living Faithfully—Working for Living Wages’*

by Rev. William G. Sinkford

Good morning. I'm honored to be delivering my first sermon of the new year here in Nashua on Let Justice Roll Living Wage Sunday. And excited to know that many of my UU colleagues and colleagues of various faith traditions have been preaching throughout this month – on Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday and today - about the need to stand with low wage workers and their families. There are such opportunities before us – for all of us who have been working for justice so long.

These are such hopeful times! In fact a lot of folks are feeling hope for the first time in a very long time. We have high hopes and high expectations. But it is also a period of intense anxiety – about the economy and about whether our hopes and expectations will be realized. We fear disappointment. We fear that progress won't come soon enough...or at all...that the economic challenges will overwhelm us

It's a time where we need to examine our assumptions of how to work for change – because many of the assumptions that we carry no longer hold. Many of us have been in 'protest mode' for a long time. Now we're actually challenged to be part of change, to be part of a new governing coalition, and to develop a new imagination for what justice, equity, and compassion look like. It's not a time for critiquing from the sidelines. We have opportunities and obligations to be part of creative solutions. Many economists and others are noting that the silver lining to our current economic crisis is that the old model of an unregulated market is bankrupt, quite literally and we can now re-envision and establish a new economy for our times. That is a big and complex task. We can't let our anxiety drive us. Anxiety shuts down creativity and hope. We need to make a space in our hearts where our hope can lead us. Where our vision and hands-on advocacy, practicality, and knowledge can help us to 'get things done.'

Establishing a minimum wage that is closer to a living wage is one piece of developing a sound economic policy. The minimum wage sets the wage floor. Tax policy, income policy, investment policy are other pieces of the complexity we call our economy.

As we move from the 'politics of protest' to the 'politics of power,' – and that's what we are doing – make no mistake -- we need to understand the complexities we're dealing with, to understand what our expectations of the new administration are, and to acknowledge that the imagination that we need to hold in our hearts is a complex one.

Most people remember the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom as the occasion where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his famous "I Have a Dream" address. A key demand of the march was "a national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living." Certainly, Dr. King did not dream that the value of the minimum wage would be lower today than it was in 1963. But he did dream that "one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

On March 18, 1968, days before his murder, King told striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tenn., "It is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis . . . getting part-time income." He said, "We are tired of working our hands off and laboring every day and not even making a wage adequate with daily basic necessities of life."

As we all know, Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, the day after he delivered what would be his final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," in support of those workers.

Dr. King never lost hope, never stopped working for justice. He had been to the mountaintop. We need to sustain our hope as well, to create our own "stone of hope." I recall hearing those words, "stone of hope," from Dr. King as I sat in a crowded room at the UUA's General Assembly in Hollywood, Florida, in June of 1966, listening to him deliver the Ware Lecture. Dr. King decried militarism, economic injustice and the scourge of racism. He invoked the words of Jefferson and Lincoln, a call for Americans to live up to the ideals that this country was based upon. And he called for Unitarian Universalists to be part of this struggle, reminding us "when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian of the community and of society."

Today I call upon Unitarian Universalists to honor Dr. King's memory by renewing our commitment to peace and justice, to stay in the struggle and to be part of making change. I believe there will be pushback and backlash every time the circle of equality is widened, but I hew my stone of hope with these words: "The arc of the universe is long," said Dr. King, quoting 19th century Unitarian abolitionist Theodore Parker, "but it bends toward justice."

Rewarding an honest day's labor with a just living wage is the right thing to do, and advocating for fair compensation is our religious duty. A full time job should lift you out of poverty not keep you in it! Today the minimum wage is set so low that millions of people working full time on low wages (whether minimum wage or above minimum wage) are constantly choosing which necessities to go without: paying rent or buying food; paying for childcare or paying for healthcare.

Critics of raising the minimum wage often portray minimum wage workers as teenagers living with their families working for fun money. In fact, three out of four minimum wage workers are age 21 or older. Two out of three minimum wage workers are women. Most minimum wage workers are women with children. They are healthcare workers, childcare workers, food service workers. While not the majority, people of color and immigrants make up a disproportionate percentage of minimum wage workers. Most minimum wage workers are high school graduates. And as for teenagers working in minimum wage jobs, many of them are working to save for a college education.

The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee are members of the interfaith [Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign](#), a nonpartisan coalition of more than 90 faith, community, labor and business organizations. Let Justice Roll played a lead role in winning the current federal increase of \$6.55 per hour (the first raise in ten years) that will be raised to \$7.25 per hour in 2009. Even after the minimum wage rises to \$7.25 in July 2009, it will be far below the minimum wage of 1968. Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign, has launched the "\$10 in10" campaign to raise the federal minimum wage to \$10 an hour in 2010.

It would take a \$10.08 minimum wage now to match the buying power of the minimum wage in 1968—four decades ago. While \$10 in 10 is still not a living wage, it gets us closer to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that called for "a minimum standard of living necessary for health, efficiency and general well-being of workers."

We can't fight poverty with a poverty wage. Poverty rates are higher now than they were in the 1970s, in part due to the eroded value of the minimum wage. There has been a massive shift of income from the bottom and middle to the top over the past several decades. The pay gap between minimum wage workers and CEOs grew nearly fifteen times wider between 1980 and

2006. CEOs at big corporations make more in a couple of hours than minimum wage workers make in a year -- not even counting CEO perks and benefits.

In 1980, the average CEO at a big corporation made as much as 97 minimum wage workers. In 1997, the average CEO made as much as 728 minimum wage workers. In 2007, CEOs made as much as 1,131 minimum wage workers.

The richest 1% of Americans has increased their share of the nation's income to a higher level than any year since 1928—the eve of the Great Depression

In hard economic times it is more important than ever for people of faith to stand with low-wage workers and their families.

And let us remember that the minimum wage was not enacted during good times, but during the extremely hard times of the Great Depression. When the federal minimum wage was established in 1938, the unemployment rate was a very high 19 percent. President Roosevelt saw the minimum wage as "an essential part of economic recovery." It would put a floor under workers wages, alleviate the hardship of inadequate wages, and stimulate the economy and job creation by increasing consumer purchasing power.

We cannot let the current conversation about rescuing our economy take raising wages off the table. Extensive research refutes the claim that increasing the minimum wage causes increased unemployment and business closures.

Numerous states raised their minimum wages higher than the federal level during the 1997-2007 stagnation of the federal minimum wage at \$5.15. States that raised their minimum wages above the federal level experienced better employment and small business trends than states that did not.

The minimum wage sets the wage floor. As Roosevelt and his advisers understood, we have to raise the floor to lift the economy.

Frances Perkins was Secretary of Labor from 1933 to 1945 and the first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet. She accepted the position after securing Roosevelt's commitment to champion the minimum wage, unemployment insurance and old-age insurance.

The Department of Labor is located in the Frances Perkins Building. The time has come to reclaim Perkins' legacy and build on it. President Barack Obama's choice for labor secretary, California Rep. Hilda Solis, will help us do so. The daughter of two immigrant workers and union members, she promised to "improve the opportunities for hardworking families" at her confirmation hearings.

Perkins worked in settlement houses in Philadelphia, New York City, and Chicago. She worked closely with Jan Addams, Hull House director, and a kind of fellow traveler with Unitarians.

Unitarians and Universalists have been actively supporting justice for working people since the birth of our movement in America. As early as 1838, William Ellery Channing, one of the chief architects of Unitarianism, added his substantial public support to the 'Workingman's Associations' that were forbears to our present day labor unions.

Not long after Channing, Theodore Parker began speaking out about economic exploitation and was keenly supportive of the work and vision of Brook Farm, a utopian community founded by Unitarian ministers.

Following in this vein, the great Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes, argued that individual salvation was impossible without social salvation, the liberation of all people from whatever shackles them. He described poverty and the attendant injustice that perpetuates it, as a “social crime.” Our fidelity to that commitment remains strong.

Unitarian Universalists have been involved in supporting a fair minimum wage since the year of our inception in 1961, when we passed a resolution in support of an agricultural minimum wage for migrant workers. Ours has been a sustained commitment; the 1961 resolution was followed by over three dozen social justice statements in support of economic justice.

During the last Let Justice Roll effort to increase the minimum wage in 2006 and 2007, thousands of UUs signed Letters to Congress, worked on ballot initiatives and legislative campaigns in several states including you here in NH. The UUA sponsored a flagship event with the federal legislation's sponsor Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, at United First Parish UU in Quincy, MA. Many of our congregations are involved in local living wage initiatives and organizing in support of low-wage workers.

At our most recent General Assembly, delegates passed an Action of Immediate Witness in support of the \$10 in 10 campaign.

It reads in part:

Whereas: Low-wage workers whose labor is often exploited and invisible, support others' unearned privilege;

Therefore, be it resolved: The 2008 General Assembly supports the Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign urging the 111th Congress in 2009 to raise the federal minimum wage to \$10 by 2010.

This is higher and sooner than President Barack Obama's platform calling to raise the minimum wage to \$9.50 in 2011. But \$10 in 10 isn't just a catchy phrase. It's what we believe is required. As we raise our religious voice in the context of policy disputes, we need to retain our ability to have a prophetic voice of justice—a prophetic voice of beloved community. We can't settle for less than we need. I'm asking you all to make a pledge of commitment to work for \$10 in 10 and to help hold up the vision to our beloved community that we can do better. We must retain the prophetic voice. Now is the time.

I'm proud to have had the honor these past eight years to serve an association that stands with the most oppressed among us.

Dr. King believed that the struggle against racism and the struggle for economic justice were inextricably connected. He sustained his commitment to eradicate poverty and racism through his vision, faith, and brilliant practical and tactical sense. He never lost hope. And he would be hopeful today. We saw history made the day after the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday this year. Let us honor his legacy and celebrate his dream with a promise to carry on his work in a spirit of faithfulness. “Let Justice Roll down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream.”

Amen.