



Missional Imperative

Update
AZFaithNetwork.org

An AFN Community Conversation on Living Wage

On Feb. 25, 2016, 50+ people attended the Community Conversation on Living Wage hosted by Arizona Faith Network (AFN) as part of its 2016 Mission Imperative. The conversation centered on the impacts of wage structures here in Arizona which are insufficient to support a family economically. Speakers included Dr. Charles Lee, Justice and Social Inquiry Associate Professor at Arizona State University School of Social Transformation, Mr. Hector Valdez, public policy specialist and a member of AFN, local small business owner Carlos Velasco, UFCW union representative Efrain Sanchez, and three workers representing the hospitality industry, fast food industry, and contractors in the home skilled nursing sector. In addition, Elaine Pope from the Theological Dialogue Commission of the AFN presented an Abrahamic Faiths (Baha'i, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, and Sufism) "An Interfaith Understanding of the Rights of Workers and Employers" as the fulcrum for interfaith discussions on living wage. "Our faith traditions hold that gross disparities in wealth are not natural and must be adjusted within communities through intentional practices of redistribution." Dr. Lee provided statistical and personal reflections on where American democratic capitalism has faltered in the past 50+ years. Mr. Valdez summarized by quoting his grandfather, "In the American dream of 'study, work, and progress' the 'and' is broken." Mr. Velasco, a small business owner in Phoenix, reminded the audience that, "It's not that capitalism is wrong; it's that we need moral behavior within capitalism." He said that data shows that local entrepreneurs don't compete on price, they compete on experience and quality. And...the number one creator of jobs is small business. All three workers who spoke gave insights to the personal impact of low wage structures.



Following each group of speakers, the audience participated in small group discussions around three topics: reactions and commentary on the personal stories of workers, exploration of the opportunities for complementary expectations among unions and small business, and the implications of faith on daily economic decisions. The conversations spanned the experiences and economic perspectives of a broad base from ASU students, union members and organizers, high tech engineers and managers, public policy managers, faith leaders, non-profits, business owners, and contract workers and retirees.



Section A: Workers’ Stories

Many agreed their experiences (on-going or at some part of their lives) were similar with the speakers’. Students commented that part time work is hard to find; employers will no longer work with students to find hours that accommodate the student’s class schedule. One of the retirees also commented on the lack of part-time work. There are few short-term jobs available, i.e. summer jobs.

Contract workers are paid only for “face-time” and often clients don’t inform workers if schedules change; the worker drives miles and is told they are not needed, using gas and mileage dollars with no remuneration. The union organizer informed us that federal and state laws mandating break time and bathroom breaks are no longer in existence.

Making the impact of minimum wage even worse, is that many such jobs also do not pay adequate medical benefits, if any.

Many companies keep workers at minimum wage with no possibility of job advancement beyond minimum wage. These “entry level” jobs are dead ends.

One person shared her/his experience that someone was hired and paid more for the same job because of their educational background. This seems counter to the idea of pay for work done.

All agreed that our culture no longer respects workers nor respects many types of work. This leads to a common behavior among employers of entry and mid-skill jobs that the employee is lucky to have a job and that they are replaceable. One person called this job-site bullying.

Sharing stories of successful union campaigns, such as a recent construction workers’ union, can encourage others to do the same.

Conversely, several people expressed concern that fighting for better wages makes persons vulnerable to losing their job. Community support is required to reduce the risk of job loss and to provide economic support during worker-employer conversations.

Section B: Union and Biz Reps

One thing people can do is to shop at union stores and to shop local businesses, but having a list of such businesses is very hard to come by.

Not spending money at fast food chains is one way of protesting.

Everyone needs to be part of the struggle, because everyone is affected. The middle class is shrinking. Several people observed that many large corporations have built reputations on these platforms [hire local and buy local] but no longer adhere to them.

One person said credit unions are the best kept secret, banks are not supporters of workers.

The American Myth of the self-made man and the rugged individual is undercutting the effectiveness of unions and of the reciprocity of employer-employee relationship for the health of the firm.

Speaker Carlos Velasco commented that local small businesses will not be able to compete on the price of goods, but they can more readily compete by raising wages for their own workers to be able to make some purchases locally.

It is a hopeful sign that some small businesses are doing better than many large businesses in paying benefits to workers and there are credible reports to indicate that charitable dollars come disproportionately from small business owners.

The argument over minimum wage has convoluted the worker’s background with the job’s task, in other words, one argument offered supporting the current minimum wage structure is that many minimum wage workers are students who “don’t need” a living wage. This too, is counter to the historic understanding that pay is for work done.

There is an increasing lack of loyalty between employer and employee that can be seen in both directions. This damages the business and ultimately the neighborhood.



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“Being Together, Talking Together, Acting Together”

Section C: Theological Reflections on employer obligations and relationships

Without a living wage workers do not have enough time in their day to act upon their compassion for others. With a living wage, workers can give, and can have a more relaxed and balanced life. This relates to many sacred texts’ expression of principles of mutuality and dignity.

A Muslim group member indicated that many texts in Islam express the principle that no one should go hungry while others have a full stomach. When all are well fed, clothed, and housed, the community goes on to address other needs.

Christianity began with Jesus sharing with all present. While capitalism emerged from this, it has not always been true in practice, however.

When both parents are working 65+ hours a week, and unemployment out of college is at an all time high, then family dynamics are severely affected. It is families and faith communities that instill values in individuals as members of society. Low wages are more than an economic issue, they negatively affect the fabric of our society, as well.

There is a common theme within Christianity, Islam and Judaism (in alphabetical order) of remuneration commensurate to the work done. Several disagreed with this, yet we ultimately agreed that as long as the minimum daily wage should be sufficient to nurture a family, wages should float above this minimum according to the work done. What has happened is the upper levels have grown while the minimums have decreased in real dollar value.

Several persons expressed concern that religion has a dubious reputation, of being judgmental and siding with those having economic power. Therefore, they expressed some skepticism that religious faith can speak truth to power in a compelling way.

Someone asked a very key question for religious leaders, “How do we manage to ignore parts of our scriptures?”

One person observed that people of faith can make a difference. **We must continue to work for the common good, for if we don’t, who will?** That seems like a great summary statement for the evening.

The next conversation in this series is scheduled for April 28, 2016 from 6:30-8:30 pm at the Papago Buttes Church of the Brethren on 2450 N. 64th St. between McDowell and Thomas. Please join us for A Community Conversation on the disproportionate impact of economic inequality: on persons of color, by gender, to persons with disabling conditions, and veterans.

