

A Living Wage Future and Beloved Community
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In the children's story, "The Sleeping Bread," the town baker is the center of this Latin American village's identity. He gives his leftover bread every day to the man Zafiro so that he would have something to eat. When the reigning dignitaries from afar plan to come for a visit, the village leaders decide to "clean things up." So, Zafiro is removed from the scene. Subsequently, tragedy occurs and no bread rises. Disaster looms as the dignitaries approach. Finally, the baker asks Zafiro what can be done to salvage the situation. Zafiro reveals that a tear of his was shed into the dough when he was forced to leave as unworthy. The town's powers that be realize that Zafiro's exclusion was the real injustice. The bread now is able to rise, baked and shared with all. Zafiro becomes the head of the parade. The one who is considered an "other" may be the person on whose relationship the well-being of our community may depend.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spent his last days supporting sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. They were working under the most difficult, unseemly conditions, with no prospects for higher wages, promotions, or other benefits for their backbreaking labor. Dr. King came alongside these workers organizing for economic rights, as part of his "Poor People's Campaign," adding poverty to racism, and militarism as the triplets of injustice that he pledged to confront and for which he ultimately sacrificed his life. Today, we would add environmental devastation to these triplets. Dr. King proposed an alternative to these systemic injustices: a Beloved Community where all are given their due, people's humanity was valued, and the opportunity to flourish was available to all. Sanitation workers still struggle today to achieve a living wage, just as many employees do here in Ithaca. These challenges are interconnected. So are the solutions. I believe that a living wage future is possible in Tompkins County.

When we hear of a "living wage," we think of a number first, such as the \$16.61 per hour it was in 2022 and \$18.45 in 2023. At a deeper level, living wage really speaks to the values that make for a just society and inclusive community. One's wage is a basic measure for self-sufficiency, in other words, the ability for a single individual to pay on a monthly basis housing, utilities, health care, food, child care, transportation, cell phone, clothing. A living wage, more than just a survival wage, allows adults to have time off and enjoy their families, in other words, not be one paycheck away from falling through the cracks.

United Way has a similar standard, called the Alice (or Asset Limited Constrained Employed) threshold. We fund the Alice 2-1-1 program which offers up to \$500 on a one-time basis for people, often from what used to be called the working class, who request support. Not surprisingly, rental assistance and car repairs are the needs most frequently expressed. One time many years ago in New York City, when my father lost his job, my mother once sought this kind of help for rent for our family of 4 boys until he was able to get a new job. My mother is

still in that apartment decades later. In Tompkins County today, more than 40% of households take home less than the Alice amount which is beneath a living wage. Unaffordable housing, lack of adequate child care, and insufficient transportation options are known as some of our county's biggest challenges. Compounded by rising food insecurity, inflation, and cost of living increases, we see many families struggle to make ends meet.

In its fullest meaning a living wage means a sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all, a society where all have enough and a dinner table with a seat for everyone. Consider our context of a consumer society – “I consume therefore I am” – which has the effect of some people being left behind, confining them to the economic margins. Secondly, the story of racism contributes to Black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander populations experiencing a large gap in terms of wealth, including the ability to own and stay in a home. So, a living wage is values-based and part of a social contract where access, opportunity, equity, and a safety net all exist in a context of shared prosperity. Our compassionate concern for one another bears fruit in the well-being of all.

The first living wage value is human dignity. Every person, without exclusion, has inherent worth, value, and freedom. With dignity comes power – the power to grow, the power to create, the power to love, the power to repair, the power to liberate. Such dignity and life-affirming power must be honored and respected as sacrosanct. People's ability to contribute productively through meaningful work upholds the human element of an economy that works for all.

The second value is participation. Just as it is our participation in a democracy that makes it a democracy, so too our participation in supporting working conditions that allow people to maintain work matters. Every person has a voice and using it constructively for the benefit of all is part of expressing our humanity. Are there benefits associated with work, are there safety protocols, and reasonable expectations for input and output? Is there a right to organize and to seek collectively a balance of what a workplace partnership might entail? When I traveled the state of Washington speaking about living wage standards, one evening I attended a public hearing in a small, rural Eastern Washington community. Townsfolk were set against the building of low-income, farmworker housing, despite the fact that the economy depended on farm labor. Thirty people testified to the so-called danger that such housing might create. The council seemed to be in agreement. Then, one farm worker mustered up the courage to testify and say that farm workers needed decent housing near where they labored on behalf of all. I came up next and backed his testimony. Despite the hostility, ultimately the farm worker housing was built.

The third value is solidarity. In a hyper-individualized society, greed gets more media attention than generosity. Solidarity is countercultural. It connotes an ethic of bearing one another's burdens, a commitment to come alongside another person and walk with them. It is a love that does justice, that repairs the breach, that stands in the gap between poverty on the one hand and systems where all people thrive on the other. Faith communities have said for many years

that lack of affordable, accessible housing is the biggest reason for a family or individual to end up homeless. So, how can we facilitate supportive housing, privately funded housing, public housing, and temporary, tiny homes where people have more autonomy and can reconstruct their lives?

These values underline and amplify the concept of a living wage. I have learned much about these values from accompanying immigrants over the years. Asylum seekers overcoming obstacle after obstacle (work permits, language, school certification, fear of being arrested) to become nurses, construction workers, home care aides, hospitality and grocery workers, child care providers, farm workers, and farmers, house cleaners, and janitors. Curiously, all of these jobs were seen as essential during the height of the pandemic. Why is the dream of stability and citizenship still so far away for so many? Indeed, many immigrants have fled home communities due to the inability to survive a globalized economy that has no room for them or due to the ravages of climate change. Why can't we recognize people for their contributions rather than label them in a derogatory way?

Each sector, congregations, labor, business, human services, community-based organizations, advocates, and government, has a role in a living wage future in Tompkins County. Good jobs need to be generated and workers need training, preparation, and connection to attain them. Community based organizations need encouragement and financial support, including through United Way, to respond to particular needs and opportunities, with special attention to organizations led by and serving communities of color. The religious sector can combine generosity with solidarity that is rooted in meaningful relationships and action. And government has a responsibility for the just distribution of resources so that all have enough, can enjoy life, and fully participate in the community. Whether housing or child care, transportation or food, together systems can be improved so that families are not left with impossible choices.

It takes a village to move the concept of a living wage future to reality. There is room for all to help build the house – the house of the economy – where all can fit in, live, and thrive. It is not a given that the poverty rate in Tompkins County needs to stay at 16%. What if we took on the dream of Beloved Community and strove to cut the poverty rate in half over the next decade? What if we provided workforce training for all kinds of jobs in Ithaca and throughout the county that pay a living wage as a baseline? What if we ensure that the city sees the intersection of racial and economic justice? This kind of house will be beautiful to behold. Let us see how together we can keep building that village.

Thomas Merton said about our justice efforts, "It is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything." Bringing ourselves into relationship with people who some would call "other" we can recall the song of Kate Wolf: "Love has made a circle that holds us all inside. Where strangers are as family, loneliness can't hide. Give yourself to love if love is what you're after, open up your hearts to the tears and laughter. Give yourself to love. Give yourself to love."