

EDITORIAL: Minimum wage; West Virginians must demand adequate wages

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by Bishop Ernest S. Lyght

ONE OF my favorite paintings is an oil-on-canvas portrait by the African-American artist, Henry O. Tanner, in 1894. It is a portrait of an elderly black man sitting down to dinner with a young boy. The two persons have their heads bowed in prayer.

The man's appearance and the boy's tattered clothes suggest that they are living in poverty. Their table setting is plain, and there is a scarcity of food. The portrait, "The Thankful Poor," however, presents an aura of reverence and gratitude. In the midst of their apparent poverty, this family has chosen to place God at the center of their lives. Even in lieu of a nutritious meal, they pause to manifest their gratitude.

The implication is that, for whatever reason, the man does not have the money to buy food in order to place an abundant meal on the table. We know that a person not only has to have a job to provide adequately for one's self and family, but, in addition, one needs to receive at least a living wage for that job.

When we shop at a Kroger, there is one price for all patrons. When we pull up at a gas station, all patrons must pay the same price. The same is true for other necessities. There are no credits for people who do not earn a living wage. There is no reduced price of living for the poor, nor is there any consideration for the fact that you did not get a cost-of-living pay raise last year.

A recent New York Times article observed that "despite congressional refusal for almost a decade to raise the federal minimum wage, nearly half of the civilian labor force lives in states where the pay is higher than the rate set by the federal

government." A national campaign has been launched to support raising the minimum wage at both the state and federal level. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have already set minimum wages at a rate higher than the federal level. There are now active campaigns in several states, including West Virginia, to do the same.

Two bills have been introduced in the West Virginia Legislature to raise the minimum wage to \$5.85 by June 30, 2006, to \$6.55 by June 30, 2007, and to \$7.25 by June 30, 2008. The bills (SB146 and HB4023) would also raise the sub-minimum training wage to \$5.15 an hour by June 30, 2006. This would be a step in the right direction and is in line with the West Virginia Council of Churches' call for the Legislature to enact an appropriate minimum wage.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 20,000 West Virginians earned the minimum wage or below in 2004.

The 2005 **Self-Sufficiency Standard** for West Virginia, prepared for the Governor's Workforce Investment Division, found that a single adult working full time in Charleston would have to work 40 hours a week at \$7 an hour and have employer-provided health insurance to meet basic needs without having to rely on public or private assistance.

The minimum wage has not kept up with housing costs. The National Low-Income Housing Coalition found in its study "Out of Reach, 2005" that fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in this state is \$506. A minimum-wage worker would have to work 76 hours a week 52 weeks a year to afford

basic housing without paying more than 30 percent of income on this necessity.

Contrary to stereotypes of minimum-wage workers, only a quarter of these are teenagers and half were over 25. The minimum wage has declined in value by more than 15 percent since it was last raised in 1997. The U.S. Congress, meanwhile, raised its own salary eight times in the same period. The minimum wage would have to be raised to \$9 an hour to have the same purchasing power it did in 1968.

When the minimum wage was last increased, the economy saw an increase in more than 3 million nonfarm jobs, the lowest unemployment in 28 years, and a 3.8 percent increase in the gross domestic product. Studies of states that have raised their minimum wage found no adverse impact on job creation. It is a plus for the whole economy when working people have more money to spend.

In light of our recent observation of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, it is appropriate to remember that a key factor in his 1963 "I have a dream" speech was a demand for "a national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living."

We must take a stand for a living wage for workers in America today. King wrote, "There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate wage to every American citizen whether he be a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid or day laborer." Indeed, King gave his life in the heroic struggle to end poverty and discrimination in America. He was assassinated in Memphis in April 1968 when he went to that city to take a stand for a living wage for sanitation workers.

The West Virginia Council of Churches honors the memory of King and we choose to stand with the minimum-wage workers of West Virginia as a matter of fairness and justice. We choose to join in partnership with religious and political leaders who want to raise the minimum wage so that all our brothers and sisters can ultimately live above the poverty line.

We choose to stand because we can do nothing less!

Lyght is bishop of the West Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.