

September 02, 2007



Praying for guidance, living wage on Labor Day

by Mary Frances Schjonberg

Episcopalians have always prayed for God's guidance in their work and, in the midst of this Labor Day weekend, it is good to take time to pray that - in the words of one of the collects from Compline from page 134 of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) - "we may never forget that our

common life depends upon each other's toil."

When we pray for the unemployed (BCP, 824), we ask for guidance on how we can "use our public and private wealth [so] that all may find suitable and fulfilling employment, and receive just payment for their labor."

Against this backdrop and that of our Baptismal Covenant (BCP, 304) in which we pledge to respect the dignity of every human being, the Episcopal Church, often working with other Christian communities and faith traditions, supports the idea of people being paid a "living wage." The term describes the minimum hourly wage full-time workers need to support themselves and their families above the federal poverty line.

Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Book of Common Prayer, page 261

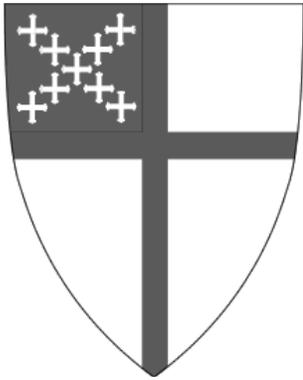
The federal minimum wage, which increased July 24 for the first time in 10 years, is \$5.85 an hour. Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori joined the campaign to urge Congress to increase the federal minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour as "the first step toward a true living wage for America's workers." A letter, signed by the Presiding Bishop and other faith leaders, told Congress that the then-current minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour meant that a person working 40 hours a week for 52 weeks earned about \$10,700 - about \$6,000 below the federal poverty line for a family of three.

"This situation is unconscionable and immoral, as the wealth of our nation continues to be built on the backs of the working poor," the letter said. "We will continue



to raise our voices on behalf of ‘the least of these’ and proclaim that a job should keep you out of poverty, not keep you in it.”

We know that work is vocation and ministry. St. Paul reminded his followers about how he worked for his keep while he lived among them. Jesus used workers and employees to illustrate many of his parables. He compared the spread of the kingdom of God with sending laborers out to reap the harvest.



Church has long history supporting living wage efforts

The Episcopal Church has a long history of supporting economic justice for all workers.

Its efforts on behalf of a living-wage began at the 72nd General Convention in 1997 with the approval of Resolution D082, which supported legislation and called for dioceses and congregations to set living-wage standards as the “minimum acceptable norm” for their employees.

The 75th General Convention in June 2006 passed Resolution D047, titled “Justice, Respect, and a Living Wage,” committing itself “at all levels to contract solely with union hotels in its meetings, or to obtain confirmation that local prevailing ‘living wages’ are paid by all hotels the Church uses.”

The resolution also strongly urges the Church Center staff in New York and especially the General Convention Planning Office to assure that dioceses that host Episcopal Church events comply with a resolution (A130) from the 74th General Convention by contracting only with companies that “provide their employees with a living wage and serve as a model for ethical labor practices.”

The resolution also said the church would increase its advocacy for states and cities to pass living-wage legislation.

The staff of the Office of Government Relations (www.episcopalchurch.org/eppn) in Washington, D.C., makes the church’s views known to Congress and the federal government. The church’s Office of Peace and Justice Ministries (www.episcopalchurch.org/social-justice) pursues economic justice issues as does the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice (<http://www.enej.org>).

The Rev. Mary Frances Schjonberg is national correspondent for the Episcopal News Service.