



## Church of the Brethren General Board

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# Resolution for a Just Minimum Wage

March, 1988

The Bible contains numerous statements concerning the extremes of economic conditions—poverty and wealth. Neither of these conditions is desirable for the faithful, or pleasing to God. The biblical attitude is clear in Proverbs 30:8-9:

Put fraud and lying far from me; give me neither poverty nor wealth, provide me only with the food I need. If I have too much, I shall deny thee and say, “Who is the Lord?” If I am reduced to poverty, I shall steal and blacken the name of my God. (NEB)

The God of our faith identifies with the suffering of the dispossessed. In Exodus 3:7 God says to Moses, “I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them.” Our God first becomes known in caring activity for the dispossessed, those who are not experiencing wholeness.

This reached its fullest expression when God as “the word made flesh” experienced death on the cross as a criminal and an outcast, affirming the divine desire to restore wholeness.

The Old Testament constantly mentions that the poor and the needy (i.e., the economically deprived) are special recipients of God’s care and God’s activity in their behalf. “‘Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now arise,’ says the Lord; ‘I will place him in the safety for which he longs’” (Ps. 12:5, RSV).

In Israel, the poor and the needy were entitled to the care of the community. Israel assumed that genuine need was due to a breakdown in the equitable distribution of the community resources or to a status over which one had no control (e.g., widows, orphans). Thus the responsibility for initiative lay with the privileged rather than with the poor themselves. By contrast, our society commonly assumes that the poor and the needy ought to bear the major burden of bettering their own condition.

The Old Testament prophets were great advocates on behalf of the poor. Time after time the prophets announce judgment because the poor have been exploited and their right denied (Amos 5:11). They call for repentance and programs of justice and equity for the poor and needy (Isa. 1:16-17).

In the New Testament, Jesus radicalizes the tradition of care for the poor and needy (along with others of the dispossessed--the outcast, the oppressed, the sinner). In Luke 4:16ff, Jesus opens his public ministry by identifying himself with Isaiah 61:1-2: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . .” (RSV)

Jesus often associated with the poor and with society’s outcasts and was criticized for it (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). It seems that Jesus and the disciples adopted the lifestyle of the poor. When Jesus sent the disciples out, he required them to go in extreme poverty (Luke 9:3; 10:4).

In his preaching, Jesus often spoke with concern for the poor and indicated that they were especially blessed by God. The parable of the banquet (Luke 14:16ff) indicates that the poor may inherit the kingdom before those of position in society. The passage on the great judgment (Matt. 25:31ff) makes clear that Jesus identified with the poor and the needy to the extent that acceptance of him is equated with ministering to their needs.

Because God has shown special care for the poor and needy, so too the community of faith is called to special care for such persons. Such care is at the heart of what it means to be God's people. Even as God knows our suffering (participated in it), it is through our knowing and sharing of experience of those in need that we come to know God. Jeremiah speaks of this: "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord" (22:16, RSV).

The Church of the Brethren understanding of justice in the context of the disparity of income and wealth, at the very least, "implies a situation where gross economic inequalities do not exist between persons, and where basic physical needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, are satisfied for all."<sup>1</sup>

The Church of the Brethren recognizes the principle that the church has specific responsibility to defend and respond to the rights and needs of the poor, the disadvantaged, and those with insufficient power to assure their rights, and the principle that no person is created for poverty, but all are born for a full place at the table of the human family."<sup>2</sup>

## Resolution

Acknowledging the inequities of our market economy that frequently give employers greater bargaining power than the employees, thereby pressing the employees into a choice between inadequate wage and no wage at all;

- recognizing that the provision of wages and other benefits sufficient to support individuals and families in dignity is a basic necessity to prevent the exploitation of workers, and that the dignity of workers also requires adequate health care, security for old age or against disability, unemployment compensation, healthful working conditions, weekly rest, periodic holidays for recreation and leisure, and reasonable security against arbitrary dismissal;
- and recognizing that in view of the rapidly changing economic conditions, the federal government is giving attention to the issue of minimum wage for workers;
- the Church of the Brethren General Board, meeting in Elgin, Illinois, March 5-8, 1988, resolves to
- reaffirm its commitment to stand with and support the poor and the needy in their priority of meeting basic needs, their struggle for the right to decent living and increasing the level of participation by all members of the society in the economic life of the nation;
- work for changes in the social, economic, and political structures that deny workers their rights and seek to maintain conditions that lead to deprivation and degradation of human life.
- support legislation that provides for a regular review and establishes a minimum wage that is just and equitable in relation to compensations paid in other sectors of the economy.
- call on congregations and districts to work for public policies at the federal, state, and local levels that would provide wages that enable persons to live in dignity and in freedom from want;
- call upon members, congregations, and districts to examine individual and corporate responsibilities regarding the adequacy of remuneration paid to hired workers.

<sup>1</sup> Annual Conference Statement on Ethics, Law, and Order, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Annual Conference Statement on Justice and Non-violence, 1977.

The above resolution was adopted by the Church of the Brethren General Board on March 7, 1988.