

Vermont Interfaith Action
October 2, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Earl Kooperkamp, President of the Board

Statement to the Minimum Wage Study committee

Two years ago the clergy Caucus of Vermont Interfaith Action began a campaign we call, "The Movement Toward a Moral Economy." In our understanding, based on our religious traditions, we summarized that:

A moral economy honors the dignity of all people.

- By providing full opportunity for all to express their gifts and abilities through work and play.
- By ensuring that all work is justly valued.
- By ensuring that all who are unable to work because of societal or personal limitations are respected.
- By ensuring that the most vulnerable among us are respected.
- By acting as good stewards of the earth and its resources, and preserving life for future generations

On the basis of this perspective, the Clergy Caucus of Vermont Interfaith Action supports the efforts of the Vermont General Assembly to Raise the Wage.

I am very heartened to see the work of this study committee to address the issues known collectively as the "benefits cliff." I have two comments in this regard:

First, just the issue that eligibility for benefits needs to be understood shows the point that any minimum wage is still not a livable wage. The very fact that as a State we know that we must provide extra help to low income neighbors for heating, for childcare, housing, food and other basic necessities, and that some of these benefits may no longer be available to a family or individual with increased income due to a raise in the minimum wage means that even an increased minimum wage is still below the level of a livable wage. Your work is important, of course, to make sure that by increasing the minimum wage, does not harm or push low wage workers further back from a decent standard of living. It is very important that to do everything we can, as a State, as communities, as employers and as neighbors to help the lowest wage workers and their families. This is why it will be important to make sure that eligibility levels as phased to keep up with increases in our minimum wage levels, in order to keep the factor of a livable wage in sight, if not yet in reach.

Second, of course the largest benefit that needs to be taken into account is health care. Rest assured, I am not suggesting that as a Vermont General Assembly study committee it is now incumbent on you to solve the entire national health care crisis. I know, that might be expecting too much! Still I mention this because I believe that as part of a Moral Economy, and certainly

as a part of a sustainable economy as well, we need to keep health care always in sight, especially in relation to our low income neighbors. You all know the complexities of this area much more than I do, and I appreciate your insight in taking up these issues, but I want to make sure we keep the importance of providing health care for all, and especially for the lowest income neighbors, always in our sight.

Finally, as part of the Clergy Caucus of Vermont Interfaith Action I want to acknowledge that it is important to remember that these issues have not developed overnight, but that there is a long, in some cases decades long, history to be considered here. In a conversation with a Vermont small business owner last week I was reminded of this and the need to take the time to get it right as we work to correct some of the imbalances in our society. I believe that perspective is correct, but it also then points out the even greater urgency of making a strong start to address these issues. Our State of Vermont, like the rest of our nation, is experiencing increasing income inequality, a problem that I feel threatens the very heart of our political and social life. In most of the economic analysis I hear studied, this inequality is not the product of market forces, but of policies undertaken on the national and state levels which have deliberately skewed economic gains toward those with higher incomes. I do not believe that it is possible to wait for market forces to magically undo these policies, but the now is the time to start to act, and a fair consideration of increasing the minimum wage is now due.

One final point: I do know that this is possible: many of our smaller parishes, such as mine, operate like small businesses. You might say we take non-profit very seriously as a creed! At the Church of the Good Shepherd in Barre, the congregation decided to pay a minimum wage of \$15.00 per hour seven or eight years ago. Since that time we have increased the wages slightly for our hourly employees. You might say we have tried to practice what we preach. I hope you and the rest of Vermont can help us all to lead in this fashion. Thank you.