

Making a moral case for a living wage

Local clergy members gather to discuss the crisis of the working poor and what can be done

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Soaring home prices, rising gas prices and wages that don't seem to keep up with the cost of living have created what the organization Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice refer to as the working poor. And since 1996, CLUE has been working to address this growing problem.

"What we're seeing is that the structure of our economy in the last 25 years has given rise to a low wage style economy," said Ben Boyce, co-chair of the Sonoma County chapter of CLUE. "This economy has been reinforced by the World Trade Organization's globalization of the labor force, which drives wages in the U.S. down."

Originally founded in Los Angeles, CLUE has become a statewide organization with local chapters that provides a platform for clergy and lay social justice advocates to address issues that affect the community. The Sonoma County chapter of CLUE hosts a panel discussion on "The Moral Case for the Living Wage" from 7 to 9 p.m. tonight at Elim Lutheran Church.

"There's a tremendous level of poverty in Sonoma County, and it's not just the homeless we're talking about," said Boyce, who was operations manager for Redwood Empire Food Bank. "These are people who are working jobs at Kmart and Wal-Mart, junk jobs that often don't have healthcare benefits and pay close to minimum wage. These people were supplementing their income by going to food pantries. This is a problem that's not going to be solved by giving away bags of food. This has to do with how the economy is structured."

Boyce said that the core of the problem is that more and more companies have decided to increase profitability by keeping wages down. "Their response to putting our working class labor force in a head to head competition with third world country labor costs was to keep wages here down. That cycle has created a large class of people who are doing the right thing -- working hard -- but are still poor. It's particularly bad here in Sonoma County. Job growth here is expected to increase by 60 percent in the next decade, but that's in the low wage sector that pays less than \$12 an hour."

The panel discussion being held at Elim Lutheran features keynote speaker the Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, executive director of CLUE California. Also speaking is the Rev. Carol Been of the Interfaith Council of the South Bay; the Rev. Tim Kellgren of Elim Lutheran; the Rev. Blythe Sawyer of Petaluma United Church of Christ; John Norris, deacon of St. Vincent's Catholic Church; the Rev. Norman Cram of the Living Wage Coalition and Father Ray Decker, archdiocese of San Francisco.

"We have a public policy crisis we're trying to address through living wage ordinances and affordable housing measures," said Boyce. "These are measures we can take that will move us toward a solution.

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