

Social Questions Bulletin

Seeking Global Justice through the United Methodist Church

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Editorial Reflection

by Kathryn Johnson

The news is unnerving to say the least: financial institutions failing one after another.

The numbers are mind-boggling. Did they say it will take seven hundred **billion** dollars for a Wall Street bailout?

Even as this newsletter goes to press, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke are testifying before the Senate Banking Committee two blocks from the MFSA office. They are saying in no uncertain terms that we will experience meltdown in the American economy if action is not taken immediately. Others are weighing in questioning the wisdom of acting so precipitously. By the time you read this, Congress and the Bush Administration will most likely have come to agreement on a plan to address the economic crisis.

As the weaknesses of an under - regulated and grossly inequitable economic system are revealed in glaring detail, I find myself convicted of having been lulled into believing that those controlling the wealth of our country were somehow providing stability. That even though it was inequitable, we all still benefitted from the stability it provided.

Talk about a wake-up call!

I find myself thinking of the prophet Jeremiah. Not one to hesitate when pointing out the inequities and injustices around him, Jeremiah speaks the word of the Lord:

For wicked ones are found among the people; they lurk like fowls lying in wait. They set a trap: they catch people. Like a basket full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and

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A Problem of Riches

Why concentrated wealth and the growing gap between the rich and the rest of us are not only bad for our economy but threaten democracy itself

by Chuck Collins

Sixty of us gathered recently in a Chicago church basement for a program about the precarious U.S. economy. For almost two hours, we sat on clanky metal chairs discussing rising gas and food prices, home foreclosures, declining wages, increasing personal debt, and our fears for the future. Everyone knew the story: The economy is squeezing low-wage workers and pushing once-secure middle-class households into deep distress.

The discussion turned to solutions: living wage laws, expanded unionization, and increasing security and opportunity through low-cost college, matching savings programs, and assistance to first-time homebuyers. Then a woman wearing a colorful shawl commented that the problem was deeper, that "the wealthiest 1 percent now had a greater share of the nation's wealth—and yet were paying less taxes."

A young man in a Chicago Cubs baseball cap responded, "All this talk about the rich getting richer is a distraction. The key is to help everyone have the same opportunities. We shouldn't be attacking the wealthy, especially with all the generous donations to charity."

A lively exchange ensued. Can we reduce poverty, the group debated, without addressing inequality? Is the common good undermined by vast wealth concentrated in a few hands? Can we reduce unequal wealth without demonizing "rich people"? All good questions. All need answers—because our nation's extreme inequality has become too staggering to go unexamined.

Most of the wealth and income gains of the last three decades, economists tell us, have flowed up to the wealthiest 1 percent of households, those with more than \$5 mil-

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The Spirit Moves and We Follow...

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY IN THE CAL-PAC ANNUAL CONFERENCE

by M. Theresa Basile
MFSA, California-Pacific Chapter

Extraordinary things happened at the California-Pacific Annual Conference session in June 2008. Many may have heard about the landmark resolutions that were passed, but just as remarkable was the process that led us to those and how it came about.

This saga begins with a proposition that was passed in California in recent years, becom-

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Bishop Mary Ann Swenson acknowledges the need to discuss the church's response to the California Supreme court ruling and makes time for discernment

Chapter News

CENTRAL TEXAS

Anne Jordan of the **Central Texas Chapter** writes: In the September prayer (Social Justice Prayer Network) which Kathryn Johnson sent out to the MFSA leadership, she included a prayer for the International Day of Prayer for Peace. The chair of the Central Texas Chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action forwarded the September prayer to our membership. Several responded with thanks, but one asked, "Is anything being done in our area for this observance? If so, I want to attend." No, nothing was scheduled for this, up until now, unknown event. But then, we thought, why not? With a little research into the "Decade to Overcome Violence," we gathered information and organized a quiet prayer service at the chapel of Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas. Interspersed with times of silence, we heard the prophetic words of Micah, we did responsive readings of the psalms and the Beatitudes, we sang hymns, and we prayed for peace. It was uplifting for all of us.

WISCONSIN

Neal Christie, Assistant General Secretary for Education and Leadership Formation at the GBCS was the featured speaker at the **Wisconsin Chapter MFSA** dinner at annual conference this year. The dinner, which has grown in attendance over the last several years, attracted 105 attendees on an evening that had been designated a "free" night for conference members. Following the MFSA dinner gathering, the Conference Board of Church and Society sponsored an ice cream social and seminar on the teaching of the Social Principles which Neal led.

NEW ENGLAND

The **New England MFSA Chapter** decided at its September meeting to move from an education focus to more of an activist focus within the Annual Conference. Several strategies were agreed upon to both raise the MFSA profile and to affect the actions of the Conference.

They will participate in the next Congrega-

tional Development event in November with an informational table, urging participants to recognize that there is no authentic church growth without social justice involvement. They will also be recruiting social justice advocates from individual churches to become links in an advocacy chain that has faded away in recent years.

The Conference Board of Church and Society has invited Tex Sample to be the lead speaker at a two-day event in March 2009 which MFSA will support and in which they will participate.

Chapter leaders plan to meet with Annual Conference organizers well in advance of the 2009 Conference to urge that the schedule be designed to include discussion and action on substantive issues in addition to the usual celebrations.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS

The Northern Illinois Annual Conference passed a wonderful resolution on hybrid cars for conference staff and superintendents as well as a resolution of protest against P. 161 action at General Conference. They also passed a resolution on ending gun violence in communities and cities.

The MFSA Lunch, co-sponsored with the National Hispanic Plan Committee, was well attended with over 225 persons. Bishop Carlos Poma of Bolivia was the speaker. In Bolivia cooperative ministries and social transformation are empowering the native people. He told those present that "wherever there is a Methodist..there should be trouble..." The bishop is a faithful advocate for the poor, the indigenous people, labor organizing, and social transformation.

This year's Northern Illinois MFSA Peace and Justice Award went to Dick and Phyllis Tholin. The award was presented in the annual MFSA

NIC UM Reporter



Bishop Poma and Bishop Jung in the dress of their native cultures remind us that God's family includes people from different cultures with different languages

luncheon during the sessions of Northern Illinois Conference.

CALIFORNIA NEVADA

CHANGE OR MORE OF THE SAME? This will be the title of the upcoming retreat planned by the **California-Nevada MFSA Chapter** who will gather at the Point Bonita Conference Center on Nov 14-15 with resource person Brian Heymans from Austin, Texas. Brian will help the chapter plan to do advocacy more effectively, a task for which he is eminently qualified as can be seen in the following information printed in the flyer for the event:

Brian has a deep concern for the role of the church in society. He runs an organizational change consulting company in the USA and in Europe and his business takes him all over the world every month to focus on process improvement, organizational effectiveness, training and cultural change. He is co-author of a chapter in *The Change Handbook* and frequently speaks at business conferences.

Originally from South Africa and a life-long Methodist, he was for 18 years a member of two congregations served by Dr. Peter Storey in Johannesburg South Africa and worked with him on the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's official newspaper, "Dimension." He served on the South African Council of Churches and on several connectional boards and committees in the South African church. He now serves as chair of the Southwest Texas Conference Commission on Christian Unity and Inter-religious Concerns.

Along with Bill Carter, he co-authored the Amos Commission's training program in advocacy methods. Formerly known as the Public Policy Commission, the Amos Commission began at University UMC in Austin, Texas, to "empower and equip members of each Methodist congregation in the Austin District to influence public policy in ways that are consistent with the gospel and the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church." While the commission developed a comprehensive training and mentoring program to equip local congregations, we are working with Brian to design a program especially tailored to our needs in the Cal-Nev Annual Conference. For more information go to:

www.umc-gbcs.org/livingfaith
www.umwitness.com/publications/witness0711/adistnews/amos.html

IOWA

Over the past year the Iowa MFSA Chapter has co-sponsored many candidate forums focusing on issues of peace and foreign policy.

Annual Conference activities included MFSA's Annual Awards Banquet at which Bishop Minerva Carcaño spoke powerfully to about 200 people on the topic of immigration. She also preached during a conference session and spoke at a prayer service for the victims of the Postville Raid. This helped the Iowa Conference to pass a strong resolution related to that issue, calling on local churches to support the victims with prayer and financial support, and to call on Congress to pass fair and compassionate immigration reform policies. MFSA also co-sponsored a special Communion Service, held on the lawn, with several reconciling congregations as the primary sponsors.

In August the chapter co-sponsored the annual observance of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as we participated in a prayer service at the Japanese Bell on the Capitol grounds. In September the chapter co-sponsored the third annual "Iowa Peace Fair: Building Bridges of Peace," in celebration of International Peace Day. Estimates are that over 1,000 people passed through and visited the many displays and activities during the morning including the many peace activities for children and others at the MFSA table.

The MFSA series of Fall Regional Gatherings begins on October 4th, with the topic, "For I Was in Prison..." Chapter members will meet in four different state facilities to learn more about transitional programs in Iowa's Correctional System, and how they as laypersons can be of help. The new aftercare programs that are being started in several churches will be lifted up and supported. The Chapter's Statewide Fall Gathering will feature Angela Campbell as keynote speaker. Angela is a young lawyer in Des Moines, who has gone twice to Afghanistan and once to Guantanamo to try to represent one of the prisoners held there.

Finally, Iowa MFSA will be co-sponsoring, with the Iowa Conference and other church groups, the 2008 Ecumenical Poverty Summit on October 25th, a day-long event focusing on the many issues of poverty, including a call to action.

WEST MICHIGAN

MFSA National Field Organizer, Amy Stapleton, was the speaker at the MFSA chapter event during the West Michigan Annual Conference and for the conference's Church and Society dinner. Amy spoke about the 100th anniversary of the Social Creed, actions of the 2008 General Conference related to the Creed and the relevance of the Social Creed for today.

EXCERPT FROM AMY'S SPEECH:

Tonight, I have been asked to focus on the Social Creed which celebrates a significant milestone as it turns 100. Great history, such as that of the Social Creed, does not give us the right to rest. It calls us to greater work. We must ask ourselves how the Social Creed can be put into action in our church and world today.

The Methodist Federation for Social Service was established in 1907. Shortly thereafter, a number of persons met, including the man who would later become the Federations' leader, Harry Ward, and drafted what came to be known as the Social Creed. It was written with the intent "to deepen within the church the sense of social obligation, opportunity to study social problems from the Christian point of view, and to promote social service in the spirit of Jesus Christ."

Those drafting and adopting the creed understood the role and responsibility of the church and of its members to be bringing about the social transformation of society through the application of the New Testament.

The Federation's mission during that time became that of transforming the social order which meant championing the cause of labor in its struggles for decent wages, humane working conditions, and collective bargaining, and, most basic of all, for the right to have work—a "spiritual necessity."

The Social Creed has been influential in American religious life since its beginning and has influenced the many denominational statements of social witness.

Throughout the years the Social Creed has undergone revisions. At the 2008 General Conference, United Methodists approved a Companion Litany to the current Social Creed as a way of translating the Social Creed to a

worldwide church as we work together for the transformation of the world.

So what now and why does it matter that we have a Social Creed, a litany to celebrate and a basis for action as United Methodists?

This example of Maureen (see box below) in 1906 could easily describe working conditions today in a sweatshop in China or the Dominican Republic.

The Methodist Social Creed originated 100 years ago not out of the blue but out of necessity to express outrage over the millions of factories, mines, mills, tenements and company towns and people who, like Maureen, were paying the human cost of the rapid industrialization and growing prosperity of the US.

"A young Irish-American girl named Maureen began work at the age of 14 in a woolen mill in Lawrence, MA. Beginning at six o'clock every morning she swept and cleaned the mill floor. For this task Maureen was paid \$3.50 for a 56-hour week, ten cents of which went for drinking water from a polluted canal. While working she saw many older workers seriously injured by the dangerous mill machinery because of being forced to work so fast. Maureen and her family who had left Ireland to escape famine all lived in one room in a boarding house. Lunch and supper everyday consisted of black bread, molasses and beans. On Sunday hopefully there was a piece of meat." (MEC Tract, 1906)

The 2008 Companion Litany for the Social Creed approved at General Conference is a gift of witness and hope to the worldwide United Methodist Church, in a variety of ways:

- 1. The proclamation of our church's commitment to the whole Gospel, holding persons and institutions accountable for social change;*
- 2. A reminder to us that, in our highly individualistic culture, Christian faithfulness must be social as well as personal;*
- 3. It serves as a plumb line for discerning God's will on social, economic, political and cultural arenas.*
- 4. It unifies us as a worldwide connection around a common set of values and a vision clearly focused with hope for the future.*

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THE SPIRIT MOVES... continued from page one

ing a law that banned same-gender marriages in our state. Then the California Supreme Court ruled in May 2008 that that law was unconstitutional, because it violated the civil right of all to marry the person of one's

stating allocation of minutes for each goal and task to be accomplished, for worship, reports, presentations, bible studies, performances, small group discussions, and of course, for legislation (not to mention a little bit of sleep and food). It is a minor miracle if that carefully planned schedule can even be kept, if all that was envisioned can be accom-

undeniable. Accordingly, they asked for assistance in planning how it would happen.

That request first came to leaders of the Cal-Pac MFSA chapter, who were pivotal to the planning that developed, together with other clergy and lay leadership, such as the aforementioned Scott Imler and Mary Elizabeth Moore. The same evening that this unex-

Sharon Rhodes-Wickett, pastor of Claremont UMC, with Howie standing next to her, speaks about Bill and Howie, a loving couple for 40 years and members of her church for 22 years. "Can you imagine waiting forty years to marry the one you love? I cannot. And then can you imagine your pastor and your church being denied you? I cannot. My pastor heart broke, to imagine that we would send Howie and Bill away to strangers, away from the church, so that they could pledge their covenant love. This is not the ministry to which God called me. I was not called to send people away from God's cascading grace through the church. God called me to welcome and serve all God's people, especially those on the margins and edges, the ones who make so very clear God's beckoning call here and now."



choice, the criteria of gender or sexual orientation not being valid reasons for the state to restrict that right. The court specifically cited as a precedent the state Supreme Court ruling in 1948 regarding interracial marriage.

Some would say the church should not be driven by what is happening in the secular world, and, therefore, the court's ruling should have no bearing on the church's position on same-gender marriage. But who is to say that the spirit of God does not move in other institutions besides denominational religion? Might not the spirit also be working in our judges just as much as the clergy and laity in our churches, nudging us forward on the long arc of history that Martin Luther King, Jr. said 'always curves toward justice'?

Be that as it may, when our conference session began, that court ruling and the resulting flood of marriages being joyfully celebrated across the state were on everyone's mind. Then, on the second day, a motion was made from the floor that conference members should spend a significant amount of time to discuss the response of our pastors and our congregations to the new opportunity for same-gender couples to be married in California.

Consider the months of work that go into planning our annual conferences, the pain-

plished before it's time to go home. And here was a request that possibly hours of time should be carved from the schedule for an unforeseen need of the body!

But a need it clearly was - for the vote on that motion was nearly unanimous, not something we often see for what could be a controversial request. This put the ball squarely in the court of our presiding Bishop, Mary Ann Swenson, and the team of leaders who plan and steer us through the tightly packed schedule of conferencing. We are blessed with some remarkable servant-leaders in our conference, including our Bishop, and Tonya Harris the current chair of the committee that plans Annual Conference (and who also has the thankless task of keeping the conference on schedule for five days and nights), and Scott Imler, the chairperson of the Response Committee on Welcoming, who serves with such dignity and generosity of heart, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, who on more than one occasion has led our conference through spirit-filled processes of sharing, listening and discernment when we were faced with difficult and important decisions.

Thankfully, our bishop and others making these decisions about the conference schedule responded bravely and positively, acknowledging that the need for this subject to be explored while we were together was

pected request was made on the plenary floor, a three-part plan was outlined, with one crucial underlying premise: that all sides must be heard as we journeyed together through 'the process' (as it came to be called for the remainder of the conference). The ad hoc planning committee that met long and late at night concluded that, ideally, two hours would be needed to fulfill that discernment process. "Ideally" being the key word - they considered it virtually impossible that such an amount of time could actually be found in the little over 2 days remaining. But 'it couldn't hurt to ask' - clearly they would have to accept whatever time could actually be squeezed from the schedule.

Incredibly our conference spent *at least* 2 hours on the three stages of 'the process!' First, in a plenary session, where we heard personal sharings by a variety of individuals - lay members, elders, gay, straight, supportive of and opposed to same-gender marriage, laying before us their heartfelt expressions of how this issue touched their lives. Some people in the congregation that day said that they were brought to tears by those outpourings of questioning and belief, pain and love.

The next morning, conference members divided into their Wesley groups, which were

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extended 35 minutes beyond the original schedule, so they would have the opportunity for more detailed discussions and also could write and submit their personal thoughts. Later that day, another full session of the body where we heard the views that many had written in their groups, read to us alternately by our Bishop and Scott Imler, with an equal number of the pro and con viewpoints being chosen.

Finally, having previously focused not on legislation but on diverse faith-sharing in two different settings, we convened for a special legislative session, where we voted on three resolutions that dealt with same-gender marriage, although they had not been submitted or numbered consecutively, and normally would have arisen in different plenary sessions. This was done to clarify for conference members the distinctions between each resolution and also to allow us to consider them all while this subject was before us.

The results were groundbreaking for our denomination, and, not surprisingly, they have made headlines across the country – though it would be safe to say that no one involved beforehand was expecting such revolutionary tidings to come from our conference this summer.

As of June 2008, our Cal-Pac Conference now resolves “that we recognize the pastoral need and prophetic authority of our clergy and congregations to offer the ministry of marriage ceremonies for same-gender couples;” and it further resolves that “while we recognize that we are governed by the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, we support those pastors who conscientiously respond to the needs of their par-



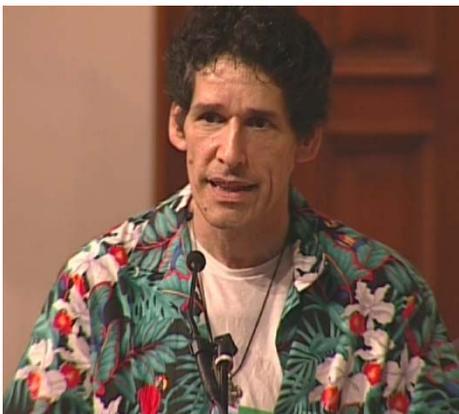
Gaunnie Hardin Dixon, immediate past Lay Leader of the Cal-Pac AC, speaks of the justice in the decision of the California Supreme Court

ishes by celebrating same-gender marriages, and we envision compassion and understanding in any resulting disciplinary actions.”

Our conference also resolves to “support same-gender couples who enter into the marriage covenant and encourage both congregations and pastors to welcome, embrace and provide spiritual nurture and pastoral care for these families.”

And finally, our response to a ballot initiative coming up in November 2008 in California, Proposition 8, which would amend the state constitution in another attempt to ban same-gender marriage: the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church “opposes the California Marriage Protection Amendment” and further “we call upon the laity and clergy of our churches in the California-Pacific Annual Conference to answer the call of General Conference by providing a witness against heterosexism and any discrimination based on sexual orientation, and in so doing, to be actively involved in protecting the civil rights of all Californians as they

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Scott Imler, local pastor of Crescent Heights UMC introduces the process of discernment

pertain to the right to civil marriage....”

Clearly God was the engineer on this unforeseen journey we took in June in Redlands, California – without divine intervention it could never have come to such an inspiring destination. We went into the process with 3 purposes: to open ourselves to God’s spirit, to open ourselves to one another with compassion and respect, and to discern how we might faithfully respond to God and the people in our communities in this time. As a result, it seems we have moved a step or two closer to God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. We trust that the spirit will continue to work its way in the world and our church in surprising and powerful ways. ❖

Full texts of Cal-Pac resolutions can be found at: www.cal-pacmfsa.org.

EDITORIAL REFLECTION

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they do not defend the rights of the needy.
(Chapter 5:26-28)

In the U.S. today we are witnessing the consequences of excessive materialism and unchecked greed.

It is imperative that, like Jeremiah, we keep our focus on what really matters. Whatever policies are put in place, we must ask the fundamental question of how these policies will affect the poor. We must insist that any corrections made to our economic system benefit the common good, and not just the few at the top.

The lead article in this newsletter, *The Problem of Riches*, was written before the economic turmoil of the past few weeks. It reminds us of the fundamental inequalities built in to our economic system, where, as Barbara Erlichman says, “many people cannot afford to buy groceries, while others are able to buy congressmen.”

It is instructive to note that when all seemed lost for Jeremiah he bought a piece of land. I’m not suggesting that we invest in property! But this *is* a time to remember the hope and promise that comes from God and to act accordingly. Whatever plans are implemented to deal with the current crisis, the deeper issues of equitable distribution of God’s abundance remain. May we have the courage of Jeremiah to speak the truth and the faith of Jeremiah to believe in a future where justice prevails. ❖

A PROBLEM OF RICHES continued from page one

lion in assets. And within that affluent group, most gains have gone to the tiptop of the wealth pyramid, the 100,000 households that comprise our richest one-tenth of 1 percent. Last year, 7,500 households in the U.S. actually had annual incomes over \$20 million.

Meanwhile, after several decades of unprecedented economic growth and wealth expansion, the U.S. poverty rate is virtually unchanged and the gap between black and white household net worth has improved barely at all. The U.S. has entered, in effect, a second Gilded Age. We live in an epoch that mirrors the horrific inequalities of wealth and opportunity of a century ago. That was the last time that the wealthiest 1 percent of households owned more wealth than all the families in the bottom 95 percent combined.

These facts go largely uncontested in our national political discourse. Even conservative politicians and think tanks concede that income inequality has accelerated. The dispute lies over whether this inequality matters—and what to do about it.

THE INEQUALITY BURDEN

The evidence that inequality does matter has been steadily mounting. The corrosive and growing concentration of wealth and power sits at the root of many of our most urgent societal problems. Extreme inequality is bad for our democracy, bad for our culture, and bad for our economy.

As Louis Brandeis, later a Supreme Court justice, observed during the first Gilded Age, “We can have a democratic society or we can have great concentrated wealth in the hands of a few. We cannot have both.” Today, Barbara Ehrenreich notes, “We live in a society where many people cannot afford to buy groceries, while others are able to buy congressmen.”

Extreme wealth generates extreme power—the power to shape political priorities and cultural norms. Our electoral system more and more resembles nothing so much as legalized bribery, with multiple avenues for the very wealthy to influence elections, legislation, and government operations. Movements for social change—efforts to expand health care, reduce poverty, and adequately

fund education—find themselves continually stalled by this monetary might.

Inequality undermines our culture and civic life, breaking down the social cohesion and solidarity required for healthy communities. In societies with narrower divides between rich, poor, and middle, public health officials tell us, people at all economic levels enjoy better health. Last spring’s PBS series *Unnatu-*

The U.S. has entered, in effect, a second Gilded Age. We live in an epoch that mirrors the horrific inequalities of wealth and opportunity of a century ago.

ral Causes: Why Inequality is Making Us Sick dramatically portrayed this.

Too much inequality also undermines economic health and well-being. After three decades of stagnant wages, average families struggle to maintain their buying power by working more hours and taking on additional debt. Neither course is sustainable over the long haul. At the top of the economic ladder, the desire by wealth-holders to maximize financial returns has led to massive speculation—in technology, housing, and now commodities such as food. These trends make our economy deeply unstable.

Why are we becoming more unequal? The title of a book by former BusinessWeek economist William Wolman and reporter Anne Colamosca offers an apt capsule description: *The Judas Economy: The Triumph of Capital and the Betrayal of Work*. The rules of the economy, simply put, have been tilted to favor asset-owners at the expense of people who work for wages.

SILENCE ABOUT INEQUALITY

Today, especially in religious circles, we are hesitant to discuss class and wealth inequality. We don’t want to be considered antagonistic or divisive, or be accused of fomenting “class war.” The goal of alleviating poverty, we tell each other, can unite people across political differences. But addressing unequal wealth exposes deeper differences in values and worldview.

Still, if we want to make serious progress against poverty, we need to face these differences. A group of veteran anti-poverty advocates, for instance, recently announced a new campaign to cut poverty in half in 10 years

via a combination of tax credits, child care assistance, and higher education grants. The effort will cost an estimated \$90 billion a year. The campaign proposes to raise that money by reversing the “excessive tax cuts” that have gone to households with incomes over \$200,000. The activists behind this campaign understand that their effort, to succeed, must focus on the top, not just the floor.

That same lesson jumps out at us from the movements to reduce the inequalities of the first Gilded Age. Labor leaders, rural populists, and adherents of the social gospel stressed the vital importance of not ignoring the dangers of concentrated wealth. They warned against the “anti-democratic perils of plutocracy.” Among these critics: the patrician president Theodore Roosevelt, who railed against the “malefactors of great wealth” and urged Congress to pass progressive income and inheritance taxes.

Between 1915 and 1955, a broad “anti-inequality” movement succeeded in reducing vast disparities. In 40 short years, the U.S. ended an age of excess and Newport mansions and created the first mass middle class in world history. That movement taxed the wealthy and made public investments in shared prosperity, from infrastructure to free higher education to affordable access to homeownership.

Like their predecessors a century ago, religious leaders today must talk unflinchingly about the wealth gap and the need for redistribution. They need to personally engage those who control vast resources in our society and amplify the prophetic voices that do indeed exist among the privileged. As billionaire superinvestor Warren Buffett observed, “There is a class war—and my class is winning.”

TACKLING INEQUALITY OR ATTACKING RICH PEOPLE?

As Christians, we rightfully are uncomfortable demonizing anyone, including the rich. We prefer to talk about abstract “structures of inequality.” Sinful social structures perpetuate economic injustice and can only be altered by changing institutional and governmental rules and values. Yet individual choices and behaviors also matter. There is a

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difference between attacking someone and holding them responsible—as we all are—for contributing to or diminishing the common good.

Some individuals bear disproportionate responsibility for worsening inequality because of how they unabashedly use their money and power to expand their privilege and wealth. For example, hedge fund manager Bruce Kovner of Caxton Associates collected an income of \$715 million in 2006. He donates millions to think tanks and consultants who oppose campaigns that seek living wages, policies that would directly improve the lives of the security workers who protect his Manhattan office building and have no health insurance. Similarly, during the 1990s, 18 high-net-worth families, including the Waltons of Wal-Mart and the heirs to the Mars candy and Blethen newspaper empires, contributed millions toward a campaign to abolish the federal estate tax, our nation's only levy on inherited wealth.

Fortunately, the wealthiest 1 percent is not a monolith. Significant numbers of wealthy people work for economic justice as donors, activists, and campaigners. In 2001, more than 2,500 multimillionaires and billionaires signed a public petition sponsored by Responsible Wealth, a national network of affluent people concerned about inequality, to preserve the estate tax. Many of these high-net-worth individuals personally lobbied Congress to retain a tax that they would eventually pay.

But the vast majority of wealthy people are as disengaged as other citizens in matters of public policy. They unwittingly benefit from the current rules of the game, which reward wealth, undermine wages, and perpetuate injustice. Like all potential allies, they need to be enlisted into a movement for greater fairness that is in everyone's long-term interest.

Prophetic Christian witness can help us navigate the politics of class, race, inequality, and mutual responsibility. Our churches can be and should be places where we care for one another, nurture a vision of a just economy, and take action together. We must make clear that this growing economic divide is bad for everyone, including the wealthy. As Rev. Charles Demere, a member of **Responsible Wealth**, observes: "I don't want my grand-

children to grow up in an apartheid society. We can't build walls high enough to protect them or any child." A movement to reverse extreme inequality can create a moral common ground across divisions of race and class.

THE MYTH OF INDIVIDUAL WEALTH

Progressive taxation is key to any program to reduce extreme inequality. For three decades, we've reduced taxes on the wealthy, dismantled public investments in opportunity, and shifted our tax responsibilities onto the next generation by racking up \$9 trillion in federal debt. We have, in effect, redistributed wealth up the economic ladder.

Yet "redistribution" remains a forbidden word in our political lexicon. Organized anti-tax and anti-government groups frame progressive taxes as confiscatory "takings" from "virtuous wealth creators." They focus on what a faceless government demands of us through taxation, while ignoring the "givings" we get from government—the

Like their predecessors a century ago, religious leaders today must talk unflinchingly about the wealth gap and the need for redistribution.

public investments and institutions that make our communities healthy and individual wealth possible.

I co-wrote a book with Bill Gates Sr., the father of Microsoft's founder, about the need to preserve the federal estate tax. Gates Sr. eloquently describes the estate tax as a "gratitude tax," a mechanism that enables individuals to "pay back" the society that made their wealth possible. Individual creativity and effort matter, he argues, and should be rewarded.

"But when someone has accumulated \$10 million or \$50 million," Gates points out, "they have benefited disproportionately from society's investments in education, public infrastructure, scientific research, and other forms of society's common wealth. Show me a first-generation fortune and I'll show you a successful partnership between a talented individual and society's invisible venture capitalist, the commons." Progressive taxation, he argues, "recycles common wealth" so others have an opportunity for a decent life. With this refreshing analysis of the origins of wealth, Gates unpacks our national narra-

tives about individual wealth and success and turns what he calls the "great man theory of individual wealth creation" on its head. Our religious congregations are places where this unpacking can continue.

Prophetic religious voices can also press for rules to ensure that the economy works for everyone, not just the very wealthy. These rules need to cover trade, tax, and wage policies and address questions of government spending priorities—whether, for instance, to close corporate loopholes or invest in education.

Instead of being fearful, we should directly engage the taboo issues of class that divide us. This means talking about the true origins of wealth and how it ends up in the hands of a few.

Whatever the social concern we are working on—poverty, climate crisis, local food systems—we face the same problem. The critical changes our society needs are being blocked by the power of concentrated wealth.

As long as so much wealth and power resides in the hands of a few, we will be tethered to an economic system more focused on perpetuation of privilege than strengthening the

common good. ❖

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"Today is the day" as the Companion Litany states, where we share God's concern for justice and seek to live that out. It's past time for a new social creed. The growth in poverty and inequality, a world where violence is the norm and malnutrition is one of the leading causes of death among children shows the need for coordinated action among people of faith to live as we believe.

Purpose-driven churches must not solely benefit from their own statements of purpose but rather the world could use our purposeful attention. The reality is that as governmental services are being reduced, the minimum wage stagnates at the poverty line. One in five children is poor. One in seven people does not have health insurance.

The goal of the 1908 Social Creed was clear "to lift the crushing burden of the poor and to reduce the hardships and to uphold the dignity of labor." Perhaps the 1908 Social Creed was somewhat idealistic but it was also very concrete. It gained force because it prompted discussion and action, prayer and witness, among people of faith not only in the churches but also in government and the larger society. The church used its voice for justice and social change.

How long will the church be as Dr. King put it be the taillights and not the headlights for society? How long will we wait to act?

If we can learn one thing from the tenets of the 1908 social creed is that it had to be morally compelling, universally relevant and clearly tied to the "platform" of the Kingdom of God.

The Social Creed in 1908 was based on the Beatitudes rather than the bottom line. How much are we willing to risk of our own power and privilege to stand with the most vulnerable on the edges of our society? We must unite our voices within the church working together, citizen and immigrant, people of color and white folk, young and old, laity and clergy, women and men, gay and straight, those without privilege and those who have power.... We must not settle for anything less than working to bring about the Kingdom of God in this time and place.

This is not easy work but my friends our call is not to be successful in the eyes of the world but faithful in the eyes of God. ❖



SOCIAL QUESTIONS BULLETIN
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Phyllis Bennis and other staff of the *Institute for Policy Studies* Iran Team, have written an important and insightful 44 page pamphlet, titled, "**Iran in the Crosshairs: How to Prevent Washington's Next War.**" Written in question and answer format, the authors raise critical issues of how much of a threat Iran is to the U.S., their nuclear program, support for terrorism, threat to Israel, and violation of international law. They present recent history and facts that counter the U.S. administration and media hype about Iran's supposed involvement in Iraq. The last section covers what we can do to keep informed about U.S. involvement in Iran and help to prevent another disaster in the Middle East.. The pamphlet is available online and copies may be ordered from the Institute for Policy Studies at www.ips-dc.org.

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