

Testimony of Gene Bergman  
First UU Society of Burlington  
Economic Justice Task Force  
April 5, 2018 Hearing

Good Evening. Thank you Chair Woman Head for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 40. For the record, I'm Gene Bergman of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, a former president of the Society and for the last 3 years a leader of our Economic Justice Task Force. Ours is a good sized congregation, with some 500 adult members and many more people associated with us as friends and supporters.

We at the First UU are guided by a fundamental principle, shared by all Unitarian Universalists, that all people have inherent worth and dignity. This principle compels us to work for justice, equity and compassion in human relations. I am here with the support of our national association (the UUA) which sees raising the minimum wage to a living wage as a moral imperative. The UUA supports the Fight for \$15 and I am here to tell you that by passing S. 40, Vermont will join the growing number of states and cities who understand that economic inequality is a cancer and raising the minimum wage is essential to the cure.

The First UU has put our money where our values are. Three years ago, we raised all of our staff to the livable wage level set by the Joint Fiscal Office. This was not easy for us since financially we are a small organization, dependent on members' and friends' to make our budget. We have a decent sized staff- to tend to our members, fulfill our obligations to the community, and keep that iconic building at the head of Church St. in good repair for ourselves and the community that uses it so often. We made this choice because it was the right thing to do.

The Public Assets Institute reminds us that inequality has been rising since the late 1970s. The last 30 years has seen typical Vermont household incomes barely inch up while the share going to the top 1% doubled. Inequality in Vermont has intensified in the last decade.

Vermont is a low wage state. In 2016, Vermont's lowest-paid workers made just \$500 more than what they did in 2006! We're talking about real people here. It reminds me of when I worked a skilled job for 10 years at a profitable company. I was making just \$9/hr and when we organized and were bargaining, management said to us: "What does what we make have to do with what we pay you! We pay you only what the market says we have to!"

Samantha of St. Johnsbury told me that she's had to work 4 jobs at once, exhausting her to the point that nothing got done around the house or her family life. The stress caused long term harm. A member of the First UU told me she worked for years without her wages rising, while rents doubled. It was her experience that "if **you** don't raise the minimum wage, employers rarely give raises."

Raising the minimum wage is one way we bend the iron rules of free market theology toward justice. That would be a fitting tribute to Dr. King 50 years after his murder. Over 70,000 Vermonters would be helped by raising the wage. And you'd be striking a blow against structural racism and sexism because poverty wages disproportionately harm women and people of color in Vermont: 45% of women and 60% of African Americans in VT are earning under \$15. Those states and cities that have increased their minimum wages are the places that are starting to push back against the forces of inequality.

A number of people oppose S. 40 because they say it will hurt small businesses. Well, businesses should not survive by exploiting their workers, by not paying them livable wages. This was FDR's promise when he pushed for a minimum wage and it should be ours too. We need ways to support our small businesses besides this race to the bottom and the embrace of neoliberal austerity. Perhaps we can look at the problems of retailers caused by Amazon and its growing monopolization of e-commerce. Or the control of the 4 big credit card companies whose anti-competitive practices forbid merchant from steering customers to lower cost credit cards through the use of prices. Or maybe our economic development agency can find new ways to promote cooperative marketing and financing for small businesses.

The point is that we depend on you, our representatives, to protect us from an anything goes economy like we had in the 1890s. The great middle class of this country was built by representatives just like you who passed child labor laws, overtime protections, Social Security, and the rest of the social safety net, including the minimum wage. The stagnation of wages for 30 years shows us that the system is broken. Passing S. 40 is one of the tools you have to fix it. We say in Vermont, if it ain't broke don't fix it. Well it is broke and it is well past time to fix it. Please pass S. 40. Thank you.