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Raise the minimum wage

STATE SHOULD NOT WAIT FOR FEDERAL LAW TO DO RIGHT

By Nancy J. Kemper

In the State of the Commonwealth address, Gov. Ernie Fletcher closed by praising legislators for hanging the banner that reads "In God We Trust" in each chamber.

Then he noted that "... here in Frankfort, the well-heeled voices are easy to hear, hard to ignore and inviting to heed. But if we listen carefully," he said, "we will hear the soft and timid voices of the poor, the fatherless and the downtrodden that without our special efforts will go unnoticed. It is often in the still small voice that truth resounds."

His final sentence implored: "Let us listen more carefully to do justice to those that our creator called the least of these my brethren as we have done these three years."

Not to put too fine a point on it, there is a certain moral irony here, for both the governor and the legislature. The God in whom they say they trust is a God who is always on the side of the poor, the disadvantaged and the vulnerable.

The God in whom they say they trust is a God who has been scandalized throughout history by lip service that does not follow through with actions on behalf of the poor, who are God's beloved.

In a speech laden with ideas about how to spread moneys from the so-called surplus, there was very little for anyone who might qualify as poor.

Supplementing financial aid while raising tuitions will not help our college students. Many of them earn the tip wage (\$2.13 per hour) as they work to put themselves through college, laboring 40-plus hours a week at jobs whose schedule allows them to also go to school. This delays their graduation from college and slows their entry into a skilled knowledge-based economy.

A tax exemption for those in active military service is a temporary measure that will surely help their families here at home, but doesn't address their need for more income.

What would really help both these groups of deserving people, and the nearly 117,000 children who live in poverty in Kentucky, is the swift passage of HB 305, which would raise the minimum wage to \$7 an hour in July.

Increasing the minimum wage would benefit as many as 275,000 of our neighbors, especially the 126,000 whose wages now fall below \$7 an hour.

When 83 percent of Kentuckians who would see wage increases with the passage of HB 305 are over age 20, we are reminded that this isn't just about first-time workers. The legislation would also allow businesses to plan for future such increases by having a built-in cost of living adjustment to the minimum wage.

Raising the minimum wage is not simply an issue to be debated about whether it should be passed in Washington or in Frankfort.

We have been waiting for Washington to act for three years; and once again, it has stalled. The minimum wage issue is not just a matter of economics, but it is a values issue. It is a religious issue about how to treat our neighbor.

There are over 2,000 references to the poor in the First Testament. It is the second-most prominent biblical theme, following after idolatry, with which it is often connected.

The Hebrew prophets were clear: It is idolatry to give allegiance to God and then ignore the claims of the poor for justice.

One of every 16 verses in Christian Scriptures has to do with the poor; in the first three Gospels, one out of every 10 verses; and in the Gospel of Luke, one of every 7 verses is concerned about the poor.

There is a floor below which it is unjust and immoral to pay someone for their labor -- whether they are young first-time workers or adults with minimal skills.

Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia have led the way by raising their minimum wages higher than the federal wage. They knew that it was immoral to wait any longer for Washington to act. Must Kentucky be perpetually in last place?

Let's join the other 29 states, and do what the people clearly support, and raise our minimum wage. Let's quit scandalizing the God we say we trust.