

Arkansas' minimum wage a matter of dignity, worth

written by Malea Hargett |



Caleb Baumgardner, a Catholic attorney in Little Rock, has strong words for those who won't support a minimum wage.

"They are a lot of people who enjoy scorning the poor and then they go to church on Sunday, and they don't see the disconnect," he said. "It's not just a disconnect, it's a gulf. They need to revisit the roots of the faith."

Baumgardner, 31, worked last spring as an extern while in law school for Catholic Charities of Arkansas, researching the state's then-proposed minimum wage increase initiative. Going door to door as part of the Give Arkansas a Raise Now campaign and researching the laws made him even more convinced that the voter initiative was necessary for the state.

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Caleb Baumgardner

Arkansas' minimum wage was set at \$6.25 an hour but because the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 most employees were paid at least the national minimum. Arkansas voters Nov. 4 approved an initiative to raise the Arkansas wage to \$8.50 by 2017. Some types of employees, like certain handicapped workers or tipped staff, are exempt as before.

Fourteen states have raised their minimum wage in the past two years.

"I have been a proponent of the minimum wage ever since I can remember," he said. "There are arguments to be made against it, but frankly I don't find them convincing."

Baumgardner, a native of El Dorado, said his support of higher wages is based on Catholic social teaching and his own experiences.

"I think the main argument for the minimum wage from a Catholic standpoint is the many social writers," he said. "St. Thomas Aquinas talks about every person who works is owed a due. One of the fundamental differences in Catholic teaching, traditional Christian thought and many Americans has been Catholic teaching and traditional Christian thought has been that if you can afford to hire someone, then you can afford to pay them enough to live. Not to live extravagantly but to have a place to live, food and be able to take care of their kids, medical expenses and be able to put away a little bit, to have a thrifty but decent life. The Church says and has always said that you have a moral obligation to do that.

"In America people think you are worth whatever I pay you. The problem with that is the worth of the human person is contingent on the judgment of another ... If I don't value you then the American ethos is you are worthless. It is the same reason abortion is so prevalent."

Baumgardner said he has met many hard-working adults when he worked as a pizza deliveryman, fast food worker and waiter.

"I have worked for minimum wage and just above minimum wage," he said. "I knew people who had kids, supporting families on those jobs. They were the ones who solidified my belief in the concept of the minimum wage. A lot of people who don't know any better or are hard-hearted and unchristian in their view think if you have a minimum wage job you are lazy and you aren't really trying to get ahead in the world or you deserve to be poor. I have been there. I know those people. I have been friends with those people. I have met those peoples' kids. I can tell you that people who work in those jobs are some of the most committed, hard-working people I have ever met in my life. They earn every penny they get. They deserve to live with dignity just like everybody else."

Baumgardner said \$8.50 an hour was set as a more appropriate minimum wage in Arkansas because research showed that someone living in Saline County (which includes rural and urban areas) needed at least \$8.53 as a "living wage." He said a single person with no children could pay for their housing, food and basic needs.

"For most of Arkansas, that would be a living wage," he said. "A living wage is enough to live; it's not enough to save a little bit of money every month. It is not enough to go to college without going into debt."

Baumgardner said getting the Arkansas General Assembly to vote on a wage increase would have been impossible so asking voters to approve the increase was the only option. Wage increase supporters knew through multiple polls that there was a great chance for the initiative to pass.

Baumgardner said the only way the initiative could have been improved was tying future increases to an index like the Consumer Price Index so changes in the economy would dictate increases or even decreases in the wage.

Patrick Gallaher, Catholic Charities of Arkansas director, supports this suggestion.

"It makes great sense to me," he said. "(Minimum wage rates) wouldn't be a political issue anymore, and the political parties couldn't use it as a weapon."

According to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, a static minimum wage doesn't adjust for inflation or cost of living increases. "As a result workers at the low end of the wage scale fall further behind every year," it said.

Gallaher said Baumgardner's research will also help Catholic Charities if it wants to support or initiate a wage theft bill in the Legislature in January. He said few employees file or know how to file complaints about stolen wages.

"It's difficult to prove the factual need for a wage theft bill because the unconvinced will say, 'I don't think I need this bill.' You have to prove something and the evidence hasn't been created."

Gallaher said he would like to see more leaders have discussions about employers providing living wages to their employees.

"Under Catholic social teaching, a living wage is something that is owed to each worker," he said. "It's the responsibility of each employer to ensure workers receive a living wage. That pays for the necessities of life: food, clothing, shelter, medical care. It imposes on the worker to live frugally and save for the future. When a national or state authority imposes a minimum wage by statute that tends to take the employers off the hook ... We don't have a discussion in this country about living wage; we tend to fight over the minimum."