

# Topeka Center for Peace and Justice

Vol. 18, No. 2

COOPERATION TIMES

April–May 2004

## What's It Take to Live? The Birth of a Living Wage Coalition

by *Bart Lewis*

Hi, I am Bart and I would like to tell you about a local effort for economic justice that the CENTER is organizing. We are building a broad-based coalition to promote the passage of a Topeka Living Wage Ordinance. We see our community's needs concerning poverty, the working poor, public assistance, accountability of public dollars, and stabilization of our local economy and we want to help. In fact, we want your help in one or both of the following: First, get the word out—talk with family, neighbors, friends, and co-workers about the living wage. Secondly, for you or any group you are involved with, to become part of the coalition.

The living wage concept is that our limited local public dollars should not be subsidizing poverty-wage work. A "living wage" is an hourly wage high enough to raise a family's standard of living above the Federal poverty level. Across the nation it has become increasingly common to index a living wage at 30% above the Federal poverty level for a family of three or four. That Federal poverty line for a family of three in 2004 is \$15,670 and for a family of four, \$18,850. I think that most people would agree that these are difficult levels of income even for basic survival.

The coalition needs to include Topeka institutions, leaders, congregations, labor unions, disability groups, people from local government, school districts, universities, businesses, and concerned citizens. Again, we sure would like for the Coalition to include you. Building a purposeful and powerful campaign will promote greater understanding and support for each other's work and social concerns.

The coalition will develop living wage principles, organizing endorsements, ordinance language, research, planning and implementation of an agreed-upon campaign strategy.

Living Wage principles require businesses that hold large city contracts or receive substantial financial assistance from the city in the form of grants, loans, bond financing, tax abatements, or other economic development subsidies to pay living wages. Workers employed by those businesses whose wage levels are below the living wage would get a raise and/or an increase in benefits. These workers may be

*(Continued on page 4.)*

## Parent Adolescent Mediation Not therapy, Not counseling

by *Linda Laird*

Recently after a particularly difficult session a co-mediator turned to me and said this has been one of the most difficult evenings. I had to agree as we were at the beginning of mediation where the family had some tough issues. I expressed how it made my heart hurt to sit on our side of the table and view such pain and desperation. Parents of teens are often desperate, as teens are as well.

Young people today must overcome many obstacles, including peer pressure, drug use and difficulties with learning in school. And that doesn't even address how they relate to their mother or father in the home.

Parents today often are working two jobs to make ends meet to offer teens what parents believe their children need. Sometimes they have their own burdens of addiction and past trauma. Sometimes there's only one parent to nurture the teen and several siblings. Often, the problem ends up being that they spend very little time together.

The teen may say they don't want time with mom or dad. The parents might believe the teen wouldn't be caught dead spending time with them. But ultimately what comes out in the mediation process is a need for more time spent as a family. Sometimes just coming to the mediation table can bring about that change. And that is what the conflict has been all along—the need for things to be different, hopefully better.

The conflict might be over chores, homework, school attendance, grades, curfew or bedtime. It can also be getting up in the morning, selection of friends or telephone time. Some of these simple conflicts can escalate into truancy, shoplifting, drug and alcohol use or running away.

Sometimes parents are so caught up in the need to have the rules enforced. They haven't noticed their little children have become almost adults.

Parent Adolescent Mediation, a new part of the CENTER's Victim Offender Mediation Project (***that recently completed its 200th mediation!***) and supported by a contract with the United Way of Greater Topeka, addresses the simplest issues within a family. It is the family's process. It

*(Continued on page 4.)*

## ***Wrestling With the Texts Part IV:*** **The Oneness of Creation**

by Rabbi Lawrence P. Karol

Like Jews throughout the world, I am preparing for the beginning of the spring festival of Passover, which recalls the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The rituals of the Passover Seder (meaning order) meal, prayers, songs, biblical passages and commentary help us relive this experience of moving from bondage to freedom, from an existence ruled by hatred to the promise of acceptance.

This annual celebration reinforces the refrain contained several times in the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy): “Do not oppress the stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9).

Other statements in Jewish tradition declare that consideration for all people should be the most basic teaching for people of faith. About 1900 years ago, two renowned rabbis were debating about which verse in the Torah was the most fundamental to their beliefs. Rabbi Akiba asserted that Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” was a fundamental principle of the Torah. Akiba’s contemporary and colleague, Ben Azzai, proclaimed that the most important teaching was contained in the first verses of Genesis, Chapter 5: “This is the record of the generations of Adam (humanity). When God created humanity, God made humanity in the likeness (image) of God; male and female God created them. And when they were created, God blessed them and called them ADAM—humanity.”

This message of consideration for all created in the divine image was seen as fundamental and, thereby, overarching, perhaps even overriding other commandments.

These texts’ general principles are crucial in all dealings with people and in all relationships. They should always take us back to the principle of not oppressing the stranger or those marginalized in society, reminding us that we should respond to our fellow human beings not out of fear, but, rather, with support, a listening ear and a warm heart.

It is in that spirit that I listen to the personal stories of members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. Early in my years in Topeka, one of my ninth grade students said that her father, a local psychiatrist, saw human sexuality as being on a continuum, whereby every person’s sexual orientation is not a lifestyle or a choice, but

*(Continued on page 4.)*

## ***Wrestling With the Texts Part V:*** **God Is Just and Merciful**

by Chris Stewart

My favorite time of the day is my children’s bedtime. We read stories. We wrestle and laugh and connect. We tell each other, “I love you.” And then I go to each of them, rub their backs, and pray a blessing over them.


My favorite blessing comes from Psalm 1: “Lord, please bless my little girl tonight so that she might become like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. May whatever she does prosper.”

Recently, however, as I prayed this blessing, I realized I had taken it out of its context. I finished our routine, walked downstairs, and opened my Bible to Psalm 1. I wanted to remind myself that the reference to a tree planted by streams of water is a metaphor for the woman who sinks her roots deep into the rich soil of the Word of God. She is blessed because she delights in the law of the Lord, meditating on God’s law day and night. I want that all three of my children and I might be blessed, and in turn be a blessing. My desire, therefore, is that we would delight in the law of the Lord.

Thus, when Bill Beachy phoned me with an invitation to a conversation, to a “wrestling with the texts” on the topic of faith and sexuality, I was intrigued for two reasons. First my interest was piqued because my faith tradition places a heavy emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture to meet our spiritual needs. I am the minister of a small, non-denominational church. We call ourselves, simply, a church of Christ. Our traditions are rooted in what has been called the “Restoration Movement,” a movement to peel back the many layers of Christian traditions that have built up over the centuries, restoring to modern Christianity the faith and practices of the first century churches. We believe that “All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, for rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). We encourage each generation to do the hard work of understanding Scripture in its original context, and to then apply biblical principles to the life and faith of their day. In short, we believe it is vital to our faith journey that we wrestle with *the Text*, allowing its Author to master us.

Secondly, I was intrigued by Bill’s phone call because he invited me to a conversation. The acrimonious debate about homosexuality in America today cannot often be with

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma”  
(Thomas Merton)




God is still speaking.

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## Living Wage.. *(Continued from page 1.)*

part-time, full-time, or temporary employees.

Some laws set a lower wage level for businesses that provide health care coverage for their employees. In some manner, nearly all laws have incorporated health care coverage as a major benefit. More progressive campaigns have included child care. Lawrence's ordinance addresses it as, "Benefits consist of either (a) a regular health plan, with an employer contribution of at least 70%, or instead, if the employer wishes, (b) a wage supplement of \$1.50 per hour."

Congratulations to Lawrence's Kaw Valley Living Wage Coalition on getting its ordinance passed in 2003 after several years of hard work! The Flint Hills Living Wage Coalition in Manhattan has made much progress and hopes to have their ordinance passed in 2005. The Community Action Network in Wichita is also actively pursuing a living wage ordinance.

There are many benefits of passing a Topeka Living Wage ordinance. First and foremost, it is the right thing to do! Living wages ensure that workers and their families maintain, at least, a minimal standard of living and that the benefits of economic development activity are spread to the entire Topeka community. Higher wages reduce people's needs for public assistance, help stabilize the Topeka economy, and increase sales tax revenues by increasing consumer spending. Businesses, workers and their families, would be helped by reduced turnover rates, which in turn reduce the costs of recruitment, hiring, and training, and improve the quality and continuity of job performance and reward.

A Living Wage ordinance supports employers in the community who already pay fair wages and reduce economic incentives for low-wage private contractors to undercut wages and benefits of public employees.

If you or your group would like more information or to join the coalition, contact Bart Lewis at 785-232-4388 or <bart.lewis@washburn.edu>.

*(Bart Lewis is a Washburn University Intern at the CENTER. He plans to have a Living Wage Coalition up and running by the end of his internship this August.)*

## Mediation.. *(Continued from page 1.)*

isn't therapy and can't replace traditional counseling. Mediation can help parents and teens experiencing serious difficulties see some light at the end of the tunnel. The solutions are developed equally by the parents and teen.

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Through mediation, more serious problems may be avoided.

Mediators don't take sides. They are neutral. They help family members communicate their needs to each other and come up with solutions to issues that may have been creating conflict. Mediators are special volunteers with more than 30 hours of training. Many are parents themselves and have a treasure trove of resources, but are never directive about what the family needs to do. Volunteer training is continuing in April for about 25 volunteers through a grant from the Office of Judicial Administration. Among the new mediators are some young mediators still in their teens themselves.

A child's desire for a later curfew may be from a desire for more responsibility and a need to be grown up. The parent's concern may come from a concern for the child's safety. The trust issues in the family relationship can be stressed if a child has slipped out when a parent has said no. The trick can be allowing each—parent and child—to hear each other.

One mediator at the close of the final session with a family said, "This is unlike any other kind of mediation I've done. It's like magic." Sessions are at the convenience of families, most often in the evening. The service is free.

Families we see in mediation come from all areas of the city and outside. We have students from all the area high schools and middle schools, ages 12 to 18. Referrals come from juvenile intake, Family Resource Center, Court Services, probation officers, schools and from the families themselves. Parents have told me they needed the process to remind them of how truly important their job is. A parent's approval means far more to a teen than most of us believe.

An hour each week for several weeks seems to renew the dialog between parent and child without the irritation, yelling or belittling. It boils down to love and sometimes we forget to express it due to our overly busy lives.

*(Linda Laird is the CENTER's Parent Adolescent Liaison. Recently retired after 35 years in journalism she is working as a volunteer supervisor for CASA [Court Appointed Special Advocates] of Shawnee County.)*

## Oneness of Creation.. *(Cont. from p. 2.)*

a result of how creation has shaped the very core of one's physical composition. I have heard this reiterated many times in the last two decades, enough that I knew many people would raise up their traditional interpretations of certain biblical passages (which oppose such notions) as

correct and unchanging. That is their personal prerogative, but I do not feel that public policy should ever take into account only one particular viewpoint in a spectrum of the views held by members of a society or citizens of a nation. In addition, I do not favor the establishment of one particular view that derives from religious faith as the basis for narrow rules that must be followed by all members of a local, regional or national community.

I knew that one of the first passages that would be mentioned in relation to homosexuality would be the story in Genesis of "Sodom and Gomorrah." Although the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is apparently homosexuality, that is not the final "verdict" on the people of those twin towns. Later Jewish tradition, including the Biblical prophets, makes no reference to homosexuality. Instead, they identify the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah as cruelty and lack of hospitality to the "stranger"—xenophobia. Inhospitability, coercion and oppression, then, are all truly examples of what the Bible would call "sodomy."

The word abomination, in Hebrew, "to-ay-vah," is one that is often stated publicly in relation to this issue. There are, however, many acts that come under this category in the Torah and other biblical passages. For example, eating pork or shellfish is an abomination. Yet, most Christians, and many Jews as well, have religious understandings that take biblical dietary restrictions out of the "to-ay-vah" category. As I still do keep most of the Jewish dietary laws, I wonder why people feel they can pick one particular act and call it an abomination without dealing with other acts so identified in scripture. Liberal Jewish movements look at these abominations one by one to understand what they actually mean in the context of Torah passages.

All Jewish movements take their own unique approach towards biblical commandments. Laws from the Torah are guidelines for Reform and Reconstructionist Jews (liberal Jewish movements), given a "voice," but not a "veto" when making a decision on a particular issue. Research, literature and testimony that notes that sexual orientation is not a choice must be weighed in relation to Torah laws for liberal Jews. Orthodox Judaism still holds to laws in the Torah, but tries to reinterpret them with a sense of some compassion to the individual (accepting homosexual persons but rejecting non-coercive, consensual acts that are not heterosexual and that are not a part of marriage). Conservative Judaism is still struggling with this issue, being bound to law, but also acknowledging the possibility of updating our understanding of how to interpret the law. Some Conservative and most

liberal rabbis would agree that Torah laws do not apply to committed, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

Reform Judaism and Reconstructionist Judaism in the United States accept congregants as members without regard to sexual orientation and will ordain rabbis on the same basis. Both movements are supportive of rabbis who perform some type of same-gender ceremony as a counterpart to marriage.

The values of consideration for all people and "knowing the heart of the stranger" are ones that we must not ignore. While I have some understanding of, and disagreement with, current legislation related to marriage, I decry the impact that such laws would have in denying devoted citizens a place in their communities and a right to form even a domestic partnership of their choosing. If we are to follow fundamental principles of the Bible, we must assure that our laws and our personal attitudes do not further oppression in any way, but, instead, that our approach towards all of our fellow human beings reflects a reverence for the oneness of creation of which all of us are an integral part.

*(Lawrence P. Karol is the Rabbi at Temple Beth Shalom in Topeka where he has served since 1984.)*

*Editor's note: Parts I, II, and III and the Introduction to this series "Wrestling with the Texts," appeared in the January-February, 2004, issue of COOPERATION TIMES. The CENTER invites Topeka clergy to "model how to talk about tough topics and Scripture texts that are interpreted in different ways." Our hope is that "we can move forward as a community to talk [about sexuality] with one another, respect one another, and ensure that we work for justice for all people."*

## **Just and Merciful..** *(Cont. from page 3.)*

the words of a God who is both just and merciful. But I also challenge those who identify with homosexuals while also claiming Christ: It is vital that we wrestle with, rather than write off the text, even those passages that are difficult to understand (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

I do not claim to have it all figured out when it comes to faith and sexuality. And I look forward to conversing with those who share my desire to wrestle with the text. And in the meantime I plan to pray for my children. I want my children to live fruitful, blessed lives that bless others. I will pray that they will delight themselves in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night.

*(Chris Stewart is a minister at the Southwest Church of Christ in Topeka. He is the husband of Angie and the father of Grayson, Emma, and Rachel.)*

*(Editor: See the note at the end of Rabbi Karol's article.)*

## **Yes, I want to help the Topeka Center for Peace and Justice in 2004!**

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# CALENDAR

- Apr. 4 Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Lawrence–Topeka chapter, monthly meeting, 2:30–4:30 p.m., offers confidentiality, support, education and advocacy for equal rights for lgbt loved ones (Contact Bonnie Cuevas 785-246-0730 or <pflagks@juno.com> for location and more information).
- Apr. 6 Beginning/Intermediate Yoga classes every Tues. and Thur. 5:30-6:30 p.m.; Zen meditation practice 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Thur. and 6:00 to 7:00 a.m. Tues. and Thur.; Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, 4775 SW 21 (Bill Lucero, 785-232-5958).
- Apr. 7 The Impact of Sexual Assault in the Community, Noon, panel discussion, local leaders, Washburn Law (785-354-7927 for room #).
- Apr. 20 “The Life of Jesus and American Christianity,” John Dominic Crossan, noted author and religious scholar, 7:30 p.m., King Lecture at Washburn U, Memorial Union, Washburn Room; Noon brown bag lunch Union, Lincoln Room; 2:00 p.m. Continuing Ed. Seminar, Central Cong. Church, 1248 SW Buchanan (785-272-9531).
- Apr. 23 Annual Tree of Healing Celebration, Noon, 1176 SW Warren, Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation (Bill Lucero 785-232-5958)
- Apr. 24 **NAACP** Topeka Branch monthly mtg., 1:00-3:00 p.m., Hillcrest Comm. Ctr., 1800 SE 21st (William E. Richards, 785-234-4555).
- Apr. 24 Concealed/Revealed, “Visual Artists Celebrating Women in Various Forms,” 7:00 p.m., Fairlawn Plaza Mall west end; reception and auction, display Apr. 12-24 (Sharon Sullivan 785-231-1010 x2246).
- Apr. 25 Blintze Brunch, 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., Temple Beth Sholom, 4200 SW Munson, delicious Jewish foods, dance and music, \$2/erving, \$9/all you can eat (785-272-6040).
- Apr. 25 Community Messiah Concert, 3:30 p.m. Central Congregational Church, 1248 SW Buchanan, volunteers welcome (Linda Smith, 785-232-9175).
- Apr. 26 End the Silence. Stop the Violence, awareness about sexual assault in Topeka, 7:00 p.m. Rally, 7:45 March, 8:15 Vigil, North steps of Washburn Student Union to Whiting Field House (785-357-7927).
- Apr. 28 Mother to Mother of Shawnee County Annual Luncheon, 11:45 a.m.-1:00 p.m., Ramada Inn Downtown (785-233-7007).
- Apr. 30-May 1 Eclectic Garage Sale, 3201 SW 35th Terrace, to support community programs like the CENTER, Central Congregational Church (Maggie Beers 785-234-6175, or Central 785-235-2376).
- May 8 KS Coalition Against the Death Penalty, mid-year planning against the death penalty, 9:30 a.m.-4:00 p.m., Emporia (Donna Schneweis,

- 785-234-3061 or <dms2@mindspring.com> for location).
- May 18 **CENTER Board Meeting**, 7:00-9:00 p.m., 1248 SW Buchanan (785-232-4388).
- May 20 Kansas Action Network: The Coalition for Workers Rights, Social Justice and Economic Fairness, bimonthly meeting, agenda includes state legislative strategy, 10:30 a.m., KS AFL-CIO, 2131 SW 36th, Topeka (785-232-4388).
- July 14-16 KS Conference on Poverty, Ramada Inn, KS Assn of Community Action Programs (913-345-2811).

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**COOPERATION TIMES**, ©2004, is published by the **TOPEKA CENTER FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE**. Bimonthly circulation is 5,564. Readers are invited to respond with letters to the editor or with articles. Opinions expressed are those of the writers and not necessarily policy statements of the CENTER. Items for the next issue should be submitted by May 20.

The CENTER is a Kansas nonprofit, tax exempt, organization that works to promote justice and peace through education and action for social

change by working with individuals and organizations in the greater Topeka community. Its Board of Directors meets bimonthly on the third Tuesday at 1248 SW Buchanan Street. All CENTER members are welcome.

The CENTER's Executive Director and Editor is Bill Beachy.

Web: [www.networksplus.net/tcpj](http://www.networksplus.net/tcpj)  
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April-May 2004  
*COOPERATION TIMES*  
insert

31 March 2004

To: Concerned Citizens for Topeka members

From: Bill Beachy, Executive Director

Re: Welcome to *COOPERATION TIMES*!

The Topeka Center for Peace and Justice is an active ally of Concerned Citizens for Topeka. The two organizations have frequently joined forces to carry out CCT's purpose: "To identify and challenge evidences of hate in our community.."

Since CCT does not have a newsletter of its own the CCT Board decided recently to have the CENTER's newsletter, *COOPERATION TIMES*, sent to all CCT members who do not currently receive it. Over the years this newsletter has featured almost all of CCT's events.

As you can see, *COOPERATION TIMES* covers a wide number of community peace and justice events in its articles, announcements and CALENDAR. **Because of CCT's work on human rights I draw your attention to the ongoing "Wrestling With the Texts" series on page 3 of this issue.** The newsletter also highlights activities organized through the CENTER's coalition structure. It is published every other month and has a circulation of over 5,500! And it's free!

We hope that *COOPERATION TIMES* can provide an opportunity for you during the year to demonstrate your commitment to CCT's work. If you want more information about any of the CENTER's programs or, if after receiving a few issues, you decide that you'd rather not receive *COOPERATION TIMES* please call the CENTER's office (785-232-4388).

P.S. I welcome program or newsletter comments and advice!