



a publication of the  
United Church of Christ  
Vol. XXI, No. 5  
October | November 2005



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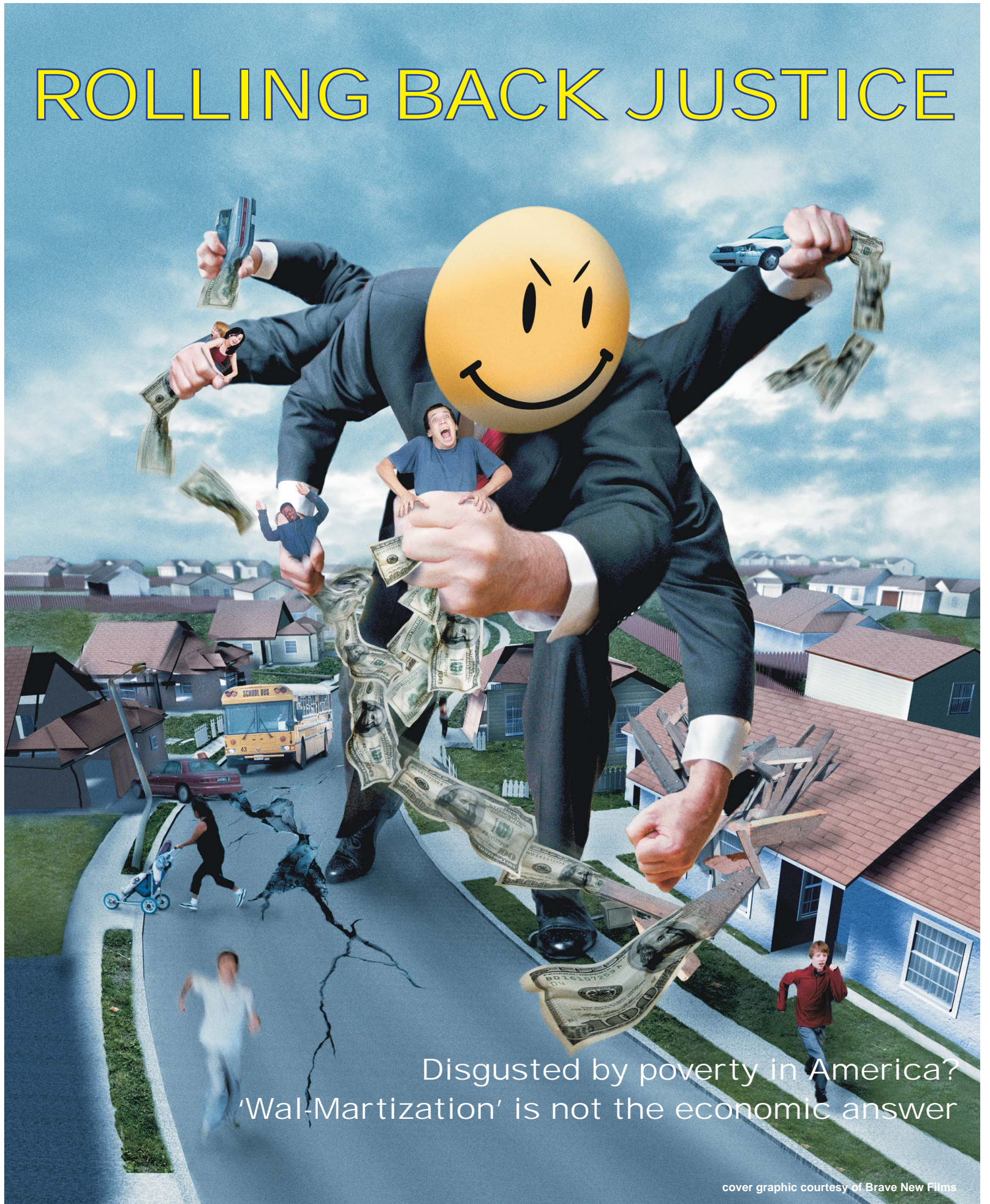
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cover graphic courtesy of Brave New Films

ucc.org



## DOES JESUS LOVE WAL-MART'S LOW-WAGE WORKERS?

Justice and Witness Ministries endorses 'Wal-Mart Week of Action'

**"I WORK FOR WAL-MART,"** writes Edward, a UCC member in California.

"If you have studied their practices," he continues, "you will know how unrealistic they are. Unequal pay for men and women, poor insurance for high costs, imported products at about 80 percent of their merchandise. For one of the giants in the retail world, they have not shown any real care and concern for their employees. Please consider looking into this. You will be as distressed as many of us are."

**"[It is] the responsibility of multinational corporations and international financial institutions to respect and hold themselves accountable to fundamental human rights, particularly with regard to child labor, employment of minorities, and wages that are adequate for local costs of living;**

**[It is] the responsibility of workers to organize for collective bargaining with employers regarding wages, benefits, and working conditions, and the responsibility of employers to respect not only worker rights but also workers' dignity, and to create and maintain a climate conducive to the workers' autonomous decision to organize... "**

*— From the 1997 General Synod resolution, "Affirming Democratic Principles in an Emerging Global Economy."*

**WAL-MART**  
the high cost of low price

By J. Bennett Guess  
Editor

Edward is one of many UCC members who have questioned what their church is saying and doing in response to Wal-Mart's cost-conscious business model, especially the low wages and skimpy benefits paid to its employees, says Edith Rasell, the UCC's minister for labor relations and community economic development in Cleveland.

"People have sought me out to ask, 'What are we going to do about Wal-Mart?'" she says. "The cry from local communities is, 'What are we, as the UCC, going to do?'"

That's why the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries is offering its support for an interfaith, grassroots "Wal-Mart Week of Action," set to begin on Sunday, Nov. 13. It's intended to be a time for congregations to stand in economic solidarity with Wal-Mart's workforce which — at 600,000 employees — is now the nation's largest.

"We want to be very clear that [the UCC] is not calling for a boycott of Wal-Mart," Rasell says. "In many communities, a boycott is not workable because Wal-Mart is the only place to shop and [many consumers] now have few other options."

But, as Rasell makes clear, Wal-Mart's low prices come at a high cost to the company's low-wage, non-organized workforce.

"The time has come for the UCC to very

visibly support the right of [Wal-Mart] workers to organize for a higher standard of pay and benefits," she says.

'The Wal-Mart Movie'

The inaugural event of the "Wal-Mart Week of Action" (Nov. 13-20) will be the seven-day premiere push of "The Wal-Mart Movie," a new documentary by filmmaker Robert Greenwald.

Greenwald made headlines in 2004 with his making of "Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism," a critical look at the Fox News Network and the ever-expanding control by multi-national corporations over the public's access to news and information. Now, Greenwald has turned his attention to Wal-Mart, the largest corporation on the planet.

As part of a unique, grassroots viewing strategy, "The Wal-Mart Movie" is set to be shown at an estimated 7,000 community-based settings, including at least 1,000 churches. As of mid-September, more than 100 UCC churches had committed to offer screenings.

"The UCC is by far the best represented," says Lisa Smithline, who is working to market the film, especially among faith groups. "The UCC has just been phenomenal."

Congregations and organizations can sign up online at <walmartmovie.com> to receive the screening kit, which includes the

DVD and publicity materials. The cost is only \$10, but reserved copies should be requested before Nov. 1, Smithline says.

The UCC's involvement with the film already has been mentioned in articles by The New York Times and the Springdale (Ark.) Morning News. And given the high exposure of Greenwald's previous films, UCC members can expect "The Wal-Mart Movie" to cause quite the stir.

"The point of our sponsorship of this film is that it's time for this country to have a dialogue about if the Wal-Mart model is the best we can do in our local economic development," the Rev. Ron Stief was quoted as saying in the Arkansas paper that covers Wal-Mart's hometown of Bentonville.

Stief, who heads JWM's office in Washington, D.C., points out that, at one time, the largest U.S.-based corporations — such as General Motors — paid living wages, offered comprehensive benefits and provided for retirement.

"People need to compare Wal-Mart with General Motors and ask, 'Where is our nation going?'" Stief says.

Stief has been active with a committee of ecumenical religious leaders who are promoting the film as a community conversation starter.

Greenwald, the film's director, told United Church News that he gives credit to UCC members and leaders for "helping us with

contacts, for helping us film and, most important, for fighting the big fight."

"The film can shine a light, [but] the work [the UCC is] doing will make change," Greenwald said. "I hope congregations will be affected, moved and inspired by the film. We know Wal-Mart doesn't stop, nor can we. So the film is designed to be a tool that the UCC and others will use as they fight on."

Although several UCC members and settings were filmed, Smithline says the final cut will definitely include a memorable scene where a UCC minister, the Rev. Mac Legerton of Pembroke, N.C., is preaching about the values of a moral economy.

"You guys in the UCC are rocking in my opinion," Smithline says.

Responsible economic development?

At a time when many communities are experiencing the vulnerability and uncertainty of economic decline, any promise of new jobs and a boost to the tax base are seductive, says the Rev. John H. Thomas, the UCC's general minister and president.

"But communities and governmental leaders need to ask hard questions rather than simply reaching for a quick fix," he says. "Wal-Mart does provide jobs, offer goods at reasonable prices, and pay taxes. But Wal-Mart also needs to be challenged to answer these harder questions."

"Does Wal-Mart really support strong,

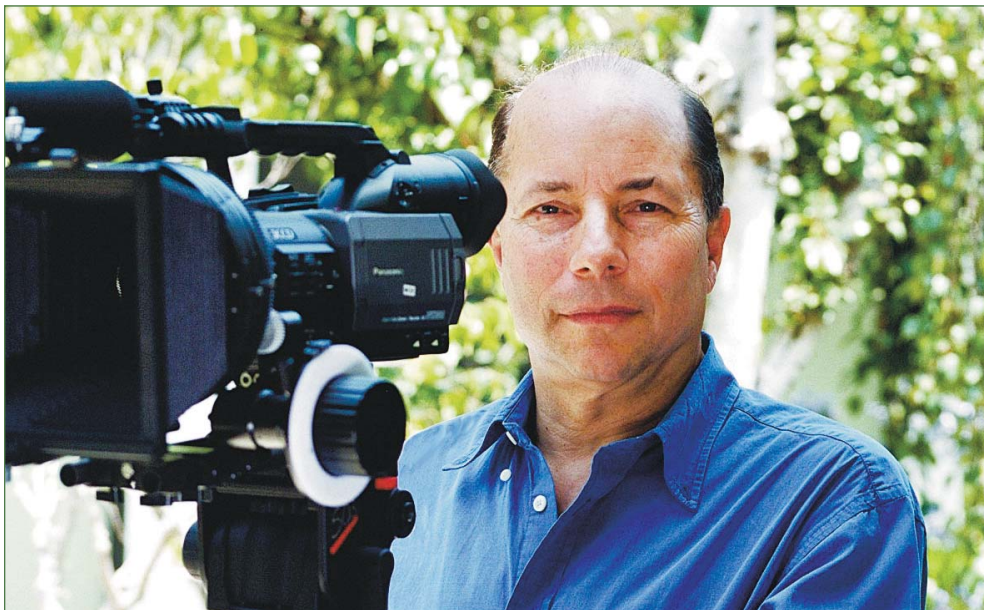
healthy families with its employment practices? Does it seek to contribute to the long-term economic health and stability of the regions where it does business?" Thomas asks. "Thus far, Wal-Mart has not been able to demonstrate that it really says 'yes' to these critical questions."

Rasell acknowledges that Wal-Mart is an easy target of criticism not only because of its low-costs-by-any-means approach but also due to its enormous size.

"They are the biggest. They are the economic model. They set the standard," Rasell

ers, the Rev. Bill Hoglund, co-pastor of **First Congregational UCC in Downers Grove, Ill.**, says his congregation's support of the successful, UCC-endorsed boycott of Taco Bell (on behalf of tomato pickers in Immokalee, Fla.) "helped our church see that we can be part of the solution."

Hoglund's worship space includes a video projector system, so he's planning to show a "snippet" of the film on Sunday morning, in hopes of drawing parishioners out to watch the full-length version during "Saturday Night at the Movies," a program sponsored by the



"The Wal-Mart Movie" director Robert Greenwald behind the camera. photo and graphics courtesy of Brave New Films

says. "People don't realize how big they really are, or just how big they plan to get. That's why we need the religious community to say that we're concerned about this model of community economic development."

Kim Bobo, choir director at **Good News Community UCC in Chicago**, says her congregation was filmed by Greenwald's crew, but she's not quite sure how or if her church will be featured in the documentary's final cut. Still, she says, the congregation used the occasion to ask members to reflect on what Wal-Mart means to them.

"People love the low prices," she admits, "but everyone also associates Wal-Mart with low wages and poor benefits."

Bobo, who also directs the UCC-supported Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), says she's hoping the film will give people the confidence and tools they need to challenge Wal-Mart's seeming dominance in their communities.

"I think 'The Wal-Mart Movie' will really lift up both what Wal-Mart does but, more importantly, what the community can do to challenge Wal-Mart," Bobo says. "It will help connect people with a campaign that's on the ground. Previously, people thought there was nothing they could do."

IWJ is producing a series of sample sermons for use on Sunday, Nov. 13, available online at <iwj.org>, including one by the Rev. Paul H. Sherry, past president of the UCC.

"[The sample sermons] are not just about Wal-Mart, but an incentive for religious communities to talk about the need for a moral economy," Bobo says.

'Part of the solution'

When it comes to helping low-wage work-

ers, the Rev. Bill Hoglund, co-pastor of **First Congregational UCC in Downers Grove, Ill.**, says his congregation's support of the successful, UCC-endorsed boycott of Taco Bell (on behalf of tomato pickers in Immokalee, Fla.) "helped our church see that we can be part of the solution."

Hoglund's wife and co-pastor colleague, the Rev. Laura Sova Hoglund, says that — two years ago — about 40 people in her church read the book "Nickled and Dimed," the acclaimed 2001 bestseller by Barbara Ehrenreich who lived and wrote undercover while working for two years in low-wage jobs, including one at Wal-Mart.

Hoglund's wife and co-pastor colleague, the Rev. Laura Sova Hoglund, says that — two years ago — about 40 people in her church read the book "Nickled and Dimed," the acclaimed 2001 bestseller by Barbara Ehrenreich who lived and wrote undercover while working for two years in low-wage jobs, including one at Wal-Mart. The book compelled church members to do more, Laura Hoglund says.

"Our church wrote a resolution that finally was passed by General Synod this year in regard to fair food," she says. "We see a real need for justice in the workplace and are committed to being educated and speaking out about what is fair."

At **Forks UCC in Stockertown, Pa.**, the Mission and Action Committee often has found it easier to emphasize opportunities for direct caregiving rather than justice advocacy. However, recently, it's been exploring ways to give members "a chance to engage in social justice concerns as they relate to faith and behavior," explains the Rev. Barry K. Durie, pastor.

Durie suspects the committee, along with the church consistory, will review the film first and then discuss ways to reach a wider audience. The church's youth groups — also energized by the successful Taco Bell boycott — likely will want to see the movie too, he says.

**Grace UCC of Loyal Oak in Norton, Ohio** — a congregation proud of its social justice focus — has been "very vocal about Wal-










ATTENTION SHOPPERS!



## WAL-MART VS. COSTCO

### Do low prices require low wages?

According to recent studies by BusinessWeek, The New York Times and Bloomberg News, low prices do not necessarily depend on low wages. Here are some comparisons between Wal-Mart and its archrival Costco:

-  In 2005, Costco's average full-time hourly wage was \$17. Wal-Mart pays \$9.68.
-  Costco provides much better benefits, including health care coverage, a 401(k) plan and profit-sharing. "Paying your employees well is not only the right thing to do but it makes for good business," Costco CEO James D. Sinegal told BusinessWeek.
-  Only 6 percent of Costco employees leave after their first year of employment, compared to 21 percent at Sam's Club (Wal-Mart's comparable warehouse division).
-  Costco's part-time workers are eligible for health insurance after six months on the job, compared with two years at Wal-Mart.
-  Eighty-five percent of Costco's workers have health insurance, compared with less than half at Wal-Mart.
-  Twenty percent of Costco's employees are unionized, while Wal-Mart fiercely resists unionization. "[Costco takes] a very pro-employee attitude," Rome Aloise of the Teamsters told BusinessWeek.
-  In 2004, Costco's CEO James D. Sinegal earned \$2.7 million in total pay. Wal-Mart's CEO, H. Lee Scott, made \$17.9 million.
-  From August 2004 to July 2005, Costco's stock price rose more than 10 percent, while Wal-Mart's slipped 5 percent.
-  Costco is the fourth-largest U.S. retailer. Wal-Mart is the world's largest corporation — of any kind.

Sources: BusinessWeek (April 12, 2004), The New York Times (July 18, 2005), Bloomberg News (Aug. 24, 2005)

Mart," says the Rev. Dan Young, pastor.

"We closed our Sam's Club account and now drive an hour to Costco," he says. (See sidebar.)

Young acknowledges, however, that raising awareness about the needs of low-wage workers is tough. That's why he is hoping the film will "internalize the importance of fair wage practices."

"It's strange," he muses, "you can get some folks to go protest the School of the Americas and get arrested, but going to free trade coffee or not shopping at Wal-Mart is tougher. Go figure!"

'A better company'

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Wal-Mart's visible support for survivors has been a considerable public relations boon to the reputation-tarnished chain.

On Sept. 7, the Boston Herald reported that, "The huge retail corporation — in need of an image makeover — has become a virtual savior to many by quickly offering victims cash, merchandise and food."

According to the Herald, Wal-Mart quickly donated \$17 million and sent 100 trucks stocked with supplies. In addition, it has offered jobs and emergency checks to its displaced workers.

Smithline says Wal-Mart deserves credit for its recent good works — even though, she quickly points out, Wal-Mart's gifts seem extra generous, but pale in ratio to its multi-billion-dollar revenues or in relative comparison to its much-smaller competitors' contributions.

"Let's give them the credit, but I would also credit the pressure that's been put on Wal-Mart," Smithline says. "Because that's our goal. We know we're not going to put them out of business, but our goal is to make them a better company."

Rasell says, in the end, she's not ready to say whether or not Wal-Mart workers "should" form a union, but she does believe they should be guaranteed their legal rights to organize, if they so choose.

"We simply want Wal-Mart to take care of its employees," she says. "That's the ultimate goal."

LEARN MORE@

► Sign up to receive a copy of "The Wal-Mart Movie" at <walmartmovie.com>.

► Learn more about the "Wal-Mart Week of Action" at <ucc.org/justice/walmart.org> or <walmartwatch.com>.

► Sample sermons are available at <iwj.org>.

## ECONOMIC, RACE GAP WIDENS

## Global 'Wal-Martization' is sign, symbol of poverty-trending economy

// Wal-Mart has responded to Katrina with about \$17 million in aid, which — I'm disturbed to point out — amounts to about \$1 million less than it paid last year to just one employee — its CEO."

Gnawing, disturbing poverty — the kind made visible in images from New Orleans — is actually the result of two specific factors: first, sub-standard or non-existent jobs; and second, a government that consistently sides with the economic interests of the wealthy and white over the poor and people of color.

The latter is easy to spot. If you drive through any predominately African-American or Hispanic inner-city neighborhood — as opposed to white, rich suburbs — you simply can't ignore the in-your-face inequalities: dilapidating, under-funded schools; buckled roads and sidewalks; untended public parks populated with homeless, substance-addicted citizens who know first-hand of government neglect.

There is also the less-visible evidence of government's brush off: New bankruptcy laws that make it virtually impossible for the poor to escape predatory lenders, while corporations are given permission to rob retirees' pension plans to balance budgets bloated by CEO salaries. New trade agreements that make it impossible for smaller, good-intentioned shops and farms to compete. New Medicare rules that reward drug manufacturers by disallowing opportunities for seniors to find medicines at competitive, affordable prices. Ongoing avoidance of a health insurance crisis that means ever-more people will have less access to quality care.

Sub-standard or non-existent jobs, on the other hand, are certainly tied to public policy, but also are emblematic of how communities are increasingly anesthetized to the reality that good jobs are disappearing. We're told to be grateful when a new employer comes to town, offering \$8-an-hour jobs when the cost of gas is above \$3 a gallon. With work like that, one can safely assume

NEVER  
OURSELVES  
ALONE



J. Bennett Guess  
Editor

that few dollars are being tucked away for Junior's college education. The cycle of poverty not only continues, it worsens.

As editor of United Church News, I am faced with important decisions about what and how this newspaper will report on the multi-faceted issues facing our society and our church. For a moment, after Hurricane Katrina, I considered scrapping our in-depth look at Wal-Mart (pages 10-11) in favor of more space devoted to the justice ramifications exposed by Katrina.

But then I realized that it is precisely the "Wal-Martization" of our U.S. economic system — sub-standard jobs, inadequate health insurance, non-existent retirement benefits, discriminatory hiring and wage practices, and anti-family work policies — that has sustained and widened the rich-poor gap that we Christians profess to despise.

"Sometimes it takes a natural disaster to uncover a social disaster," says Jim Wallis of Sojourners. In the coming days, if the church is to have any lasting impact on the "social disaster" uncovered by Katrina, it will take more than a generous, short-lived response to a single disaster; it will take a corporate covenant of compassion that links together our charitable impulses with a renewed passion for racial and economic justice.

Yes, as some will surely tell me, Wal-Mart has responded to Katrina with about \$17 million in aid, which — I'm disturbed to point out — amounts to about \$1 million less than it paid last year to just one employee — its CEO. That makes it clear to me that, until we begin to comprehend Wal-Mart's enormous size as the world's largest company and the nation's largest employer, we will never realize how we are trending all the more toward inequality, injustice and poverty.

More often than not, poverty really is the lived-out literary tale of Bob Cratchitt's employer — the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge — who cares little about his worker's needs, including those of a sick child — Tiny Tim — whose medical care depends on his father's wages. In the wake of Katrina, in addition to so much else, let us pray for a few changed hearts.

// There is no point in studying any of the claims of 'intelligent design' in depth, because the basic premise is logically flawed. Its arguments boil down to 'We can't explain it, so it's supernatural.'"

## LETTERS



## 'Organizing the neighborhood'

I am the licensed minister at a small Idaho UCC church. When my wife, Marg, heard that 30 elderly victims of Hurricane Katrina were being sent to a nursing home near us, she contacted them and found that they were in desperate need of clothes, having arrived with only the clothes they were wearing.

She organized our neighborhood and within an hour, everyone had clothes to wear. My daughter, a member at First UCC in Portland, having just moved and cleaned out her closet, went to Wal-Mart and bought them new underwear.

The patients were really happy to have new, clean things to wear. It's things like this that make us proud to be UCC.

Jim Freeman  
St John's UCC, Payette, Idaho

## 'Indisputable disagreement'

The Valleys UCC in Halifax, Pa., stands in indisputable disagreement with the resolution in support of equal marriage rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender couples.

We look to the holy scriptures and its message as our one true authority. It is here in the first book of the scriptures that it clearly tells us of God's creating power in all things and that God created men and women and ordained marriage between one man and one woman for companionship and pro-creation.

We therefore uphold the overwhelming witness of the holy scriptures, and support the strengthening of the institution of traditional

marriage between one man and one woman, ecclesiastically, legally and politically.

Ronald Zimmerman  
Council President

Not a choice, not a sin

I read with interest the letter from the man who says he is ashamed to tell people what church he attends because of the homosexual issue. He feels that the Bible says that Jesus accepted sinners and said go and sin no more.

[Homosexual] people are not sinners. Everyone interprets the Bible the way they think it should be or how it fits in different situations. Homosexual persons didn't choose this lifestyle, even though there are those who disagree.

I live in a mountain community and go to what most would call a small church. On the front page of our Sunday bulletin is our statement, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." Perhaps this gentleman should speak to his pastor about this uneasy feeling and maybe his church should do an Open and Affirming study so others could understand the homosexual community and how they do fit into our UCC churches.

Betty Lyons  
Grace Community UCC  
North Fork, Calif.

Nothing to brag about

As a lifelong member of the UCC, I feel that my faith has asked that I write this letter. I can't express my displeasure enough at the UCC.

The vote that took place in Atlanta this year was a mistake. Now, with what I just said, I'm sure you have passed judgment on me as a bigot. Well, I'm far from it. The UCC has taught me to be very tolerant and accepting of all people. I will continue to abide by these principles as I've always done. I have white, black, Hispanic and gay friends. This is what made the UCC a very unique denomination.

However, the acceptance of gay marriage under the "name of God" has sorely bruised the

faith integrity of the UCC and instead made it into a "political faith." It has been mentioned that the UCC has been working on gay issues for the past 30 years. Well, I must say that really isn't something to brag on. I feel the UCC has pushed its membership to have no other recourse to fight back or leave the UCC.

Wally Coble  
New Gilead UCC  
Concord, N.C.

Don't know? 'Don't cheat!'

In my scientific studies I discovered wonder and at times felt an experience of God in the beauty and subtlety of nature, which makes the twisting of that wonder most annoying.

There is no point in studying any of the claims of "intelligent design" in depth, because the basic premise is logically flawed. Its arguments boil down to "We can't explain it, so it's supernatural."

Non-scientifically, one can feel free to credit a phenomenon to God, which I do quite regularly, making a faith claim rather than a scientific one and acknowledging that I have no objective evidence.

If you can't explain something honestly, don't cheat! Intelligent design is never science. The people pushing intelligent design are actually anti-science in many cases, claiming we don't know things we do know.

There are interfaces where science and philosophy/theology meet, but "intelligent design" is not one of them.

The Rev. Teresa LePage  
Diamond Bar (Calif.) Congregational UCC

*Editor's note: LePage has a Ph.D. in chemistry from Columbia University and worked for 12 years as an academic researcher before enrolling at Claremont School of Theology, where she earned a Master of Divinity degree.*

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