

Witness

Newsletter of the Micah Center



Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and the needy. – Proverbs 31:8-9

Micah Center Launches Grassroots Leaders Initiative

The Biblical passage in Proverbs 31: 8 & 9 calls us to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” The Micah Center began with people asking themselves what it would be like to not only read those words, but to really live them out. These verses have been the foundation of the Micah Center’s work these last six years.

While our commitment to respond to Prov. 31:8,9 has not changed, God seems to be inviting us

to respond to these verses in a new way: through creating space where people who have not had a voice in our political process can find their voice. This invitation is the impetus behind the Micah Center’s new grassroots leadership initiative. The roots of this initiative can be traced back to the years of soul-searching among Micah Center members about the need to more authentically involve people in our work who are personally affected by the issues we address.

...continued on Page 2

Fair Lending

The Micah Center sees major progress in the Fair Lending campaign.

Page 3

Justice Conference

Highlights from this year’s justice conference with Mary Albert Darling.

Page 4

Wage Theft

Finding solutions for disenfranchised workers by starting a workers’ center.

Page 6

The grassroots leadership initiative, launched this summer, hopes to make unprecedented headway in more deeply involving people personally affected by injustice in the work of the Micah Center. The curriculum has several components. Grassroots leaders begin with classes that introduce them to different topics in advocacy. One module, for example, focuses on the theory of power and change and how to take problems and address them with specific proposals that then can be built into full-fledged campaigns. Future classes will go more in-depth regarding how to network with decision-makers and to influence them for positive social change. Grassroots leaders will also choose one of the Micah Center's advocacy groups in which they will apply what they are learning. This involvement will create opportunities for action and reflection on the skills learned. In addition, each grassroots leader will receive individual coaching to further apply what is being learned and to help participants find their role in the broader movement for social justice.

Eric Foster was recruited to lead this initiative because of his valuable experience engaging with the political process in both Washington D.C. and Grand Rapids and the work he has done to involve ordinary people in the political process. While working in the capitol, Foster took on a variety of positions, including working for Congress members and the mayor of Washington D.C. Currently, Foster sits on the executive board of the NAACP and serves as coordinator for the innovative neighborhood development initiative Seeds of Promise, an organization which trains resident leaders to build programs and relationships their neighborhood needs. Foster is eager to bring his knowledge and skills to the Micah Center by showing new leaders how to advocate for active change in their communities.

--Nate Slauer, Micah Center Intern

Beloved Advocacy Group Leader Leaves Legacy



Bob Ritsema served faithfully at the Micah Center since the Micah Center began. His compassion and curious intellect led him to work to try to change one of our most stubbornly complex and broken systems: our healthcare system. His passing on Sunday, May 25 left a huge hole in our healthcare advocacy group and the Micah Center as a whole.

When I think of Bob and his work, the words of Philippians 4:5 come to mind: "Let your gentleness be evident to all." Whether through hearing Bob speak to their congregation about the Affordable Care Act on a Sunday morning or through reading his recent article in the Christian Reformed Church's publication the Banner about the moral imperative of a health care system that works for all, I believe that everyone who encountered Bob could attest to his gentleness even as they encountered the firmness of his convictions.

The Micah Center is indebted to Bob for his example of gentle yet firm persistence in working for justice and for his eagerness to learn something new in order to be more effective in his work. The Micah Center is further indebted to Bob's family and to the many people who made a contribution to the Micah Center in Bob's honor. May Bob's legacy of speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves both gently and firmly live on in the work of the Micah Center.

--Jordan Bruxvoort, Micah Center Director



Battles Won in the Fight for Fair Lending

The Micah Center can celebrate! Our fair lending campaign played a significant role in getting Fifth Third Bank to end its payday loan product. In addition, we successfully blocked a payday loan store from moving into our city. Much work remains to be done in combatting the \$30 billion payday loan industry, but those who long for a Grand Rapids free of predatory lending have reason to be glad.

A payday loan is a small, short-term unsecured loan that typically last up until the recipients' next payday. Expensive fees and high interest rates, some as high as four hundred percent or more, come attached to payday loans. Payday loans harm low-income individuals by trapping people in high-interest rate debt traps and forcing them into dependence upon the service. Drawing from the biblical principles of bringing justice to the least of these, the Micah Center is committed to ending this predatory practice.

...continued on Page 4

This Year's Justice Conference

The Micah Center's first win came bank in January as the result of conversations with Fifth Third Bank. With deposits of \$3.7 billion and a hold of 21.5 percent of the Grand Rapids market, Fifth Third bank represented an important institution to sway. Through the Micah Center's efforts and pressure from the FDIC and the Consumer's Financial Protection Bureau, Fifth Third decided to discontinue its early access payday loan product. To celebrate Fifth Third's decision, the Micah Center organized a press conference together with Inner City Christian Federation and announced that this was just one of many steps to come in the fight to procure justice for victims of payday lending.

Another victory came about when the Micah Center contested a petition by a payday loan store called Approved Cash Advance in March. Approved Cash Advance initially sought to take up residence in a strip mall on 28th street. When the Grand Rapids Planning Commission saw the permit application for Approved Cash Advance, they initially hesitated to approve it. "I think that our presence just bolstered their conscience," said Rev. Dallas Lenear, executive pastor of New Hope Baptist Church and husband of Third Ward City Commissioner Senita Lenear. "I think they were looking for reasons not to approve it." Under pressure from the Micah Center, the Grand Rapids Planning Commission moved to block Approved Cash Advance and, as a result, Approved Cash Advance withdrew their petition. Furthermore, the Grand Rapids Planning Commission took the step of making a recommendation to the Grand Rapids City Commission that it take steps to restrict payday lenders. This step further bolsters the Micah Center's effort to pass an anti-payday lending ordinance in Grand Rapids.

A third victory in the fight against payday lending came about when Inner City Christian Federation announced the launch of an alternative to a payday loan product in April. Through years of planning and development and a grant from the Dyer-Ives Foundation, ICCF was able to begin offering to families a loan specifically to get people out of the payday loan debt trap. With an interest rate of 25% in comparison with the 390% people will find at a payday loan store and a repayment period of 6 months as opposed to the two weeks offered by payday loan stores, ICCF's loan product is good news for those in tough financial straits. While currently in a pilot phase with a limited loan pool, ICCF hopes to be able to greatly expand once it learns how to best set people up for financial success.

Much work remains to be done to rid Grand Rapids of payday lending. "There are 38 payday stores in Grand Rapids," said Lenear. "By comparison, there are 23 McDonald's." Fortunately, Micah Center members remain excited about taking up the call to defend the rights of the poor and needy.

--Nate Slauer, Micah Center Intern

When most people think of social justice, they picture boisterous protestors marching on the streets with picket signs, yelling for change. The speakers at the Grand Rapids Justice Conference challenged this conception by arguing that social justice work begins with being centered before God. The speakers demonstrated that the social justice advocates who were most effective over the long term were not necessarily those who shouted the loudest, but those who took the time to be quiet and to engage in spiritual disciplines such as lectio divina, centering prayer, and Sabbath rest.

The Micah Center's director Jordan Bruxvoort kicked off the conference by recalling his pitfalls becoming a social justice advocate. Bruxvoort described himself and his friends in college as "people who wanted to get 'it'", who understood what it meant to be just. For them this unfortunately included writing off those who did not share their passion for justice and occasionally taking their positions to the extreme. For example, Jordan's house kept the thermostat so low in the winter that a friend got up and left in the middle of a movie, even though she was still wearing her jacket! In the breakout session that followed, attendees discussed the pitfalls they encountered in their pursuit of justice such as feeling isolated, overwhelmed, tired, or cynical.

...continued on Page 5



Mary Albert Darling author of [The God of Intimacy and Action](#)

Conference attendees enjoy discussion provided by author Mary Albert Darling



This Year's Justice Conference Continued...

Bruxvoort then spoke of the natural human tendency to try to bring about change using our own resources. The inevitable result of this focus on ourselves and our own resources to bring about change is burnout, Bruxvoort explained. We are quickly disappointed by the lack of concern from the people around us and overwhelmed by how powerful and deeply entrenched injustice is. Bruxvoort used an analogy of sources versus conduits to explain his perspective. Instead of considering ourselves as sources or the root of power for change, he argued, social justice advocates must instead consider themselves as conduits who depend on God and God's resources, channeling the heart of God into the work of their organizations.

Bruxvoort later stepped down to let author Mary Albert Darling explain how social justice advocates could use spiritual discipline exercises to turn themselves into conduits, rather sources. "Be still- you must do this! Solitude is where justice work begins," said Mary Albert Darling. To be still, Darling described three main disciplines. The first discipline, *lectio divina*, involved reading a single passage several times very slowly and with great focus. Each time an attendee spoke a passage aloud, he or she centered on a particular word or phrase that resonated with them. Next, attendees practiced the discipline of centering prayer, where they sat silently and focused intently on a biblical word. Darling ended by telling attendees to "stop, look, listen" and explained the practice of a Sabbath rest.

Of course, there would be those who would say that someone really committed to bringing about social justice would not have time to engage in these solitary, seemingly powerless disciplines. Darling countered this objection, arguing that those who did not take the time to rest and connect with God would pay for it later. "Remember," said Darling. "A sense of justice not tied to love, mercy, or peace is dangerous."

--Nate Slauer, Micah Center Intern

A Spark Becomes a Fire

The Micah Center was created by a diverse group of passionate Christians with a desire to harness our desire for social justice and put our faith into action. In 2010, challenged by Kim Bobo and emboldened by Mayor Heartwell's appointment of a wage theft task force, we began to interview hundreds of workers in the Grand Rapids area.

We were truly surprised with our findings. Workers "punching in" using two time clocks, temporary workers not being paid, temporary workers being paid using debit cards (fees paid to banks), waitresses having their tips stolen from them, clerks being paid in cash for hours worked over 30 hours, workers not paid for last week of work, contractors using unskilled labor competing for prevailing wage jobs. The list goes on and on.

The task force created a wage theft documentary. We recorded Grand Rapids citizens sharing their wage theft stories. That documentary became a powerful tool used to convince our local elected officials that wage theft was prevalent in our community. The net result was our City officials crafted a city ordinance prohibiting contractors who had been guilty of wage theft from obtaining city contracts.

Looking back 4 years later, I am amazed in how far we have come. I am also overwhelmed with the needs that still exist within our community. There have been times when I could not follow through with calls for help.

There have been other times when our group did not have the expertise to deal with certain situations. Volunteers can only do so much.

Our committee knew that the best way to combat wage theft in Grand Rapids would be to start a workers' center. A workers' center provides a full-time staff person with whom workers can not only share their wage theft stories, but also can be equipped to educate workers about their rights under the law. A workers' center can be a place where workers learn about new job opportunities. A workers' center is also a place where workers can be connected to professional legal assistance.

We knew we could not move forward without a sound basis of financial support. I am pleased to announce that hurdle has now also been overcome. With a generous grant from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and other generous donors, the Micah Center is now poised to create a workers' center for the Grand Rapids community.

Our wage theft advocacy group recently met to celebrate this new chapter, and we soon hope to hire a director to run the workers' center. As we break new ground, I ask that you hold us in your prayers.

Phillip Boogaart, Wage Theft Advocacy Group



Gemma Lowe of the Micah Center marches with Wal-Mart workers and worker justice advocates at recent Interfaith Worker Justice Conference

First Tuesdays Schedule, 2014-15

September 6th

The Micah Center Fall Kickoff
(10am at Madison Square Church)

October 7th

When Lending is Fair: What Can Happen When People Have
Access to Small, Short-Term Loans at Reasonable Interest Rates
Inner City Christian Federation and the Micah Center Fair
Lending Advocacy Group

November 4th

Curing Violence in Grand Rapids
Dr. Charles Ransford of CURE Violence and the Safe Places
Alliance

December 2nd

Faithful Conversations About Energy: How Faith Informs our
Decisions About Energy and Energy Policy in West Michigan
The Micah Center Creation Care Advocacy Group

Third Tuesdays Schedule, 2014-15

September 16th

5:30-6:15pm Light Meal
6:15-7:00pm Update from the Beyond Prisons advocacy group
and Immigration Advocacy group
8:00pm Advocacy Groups

October 21st

5:30-6:15pm Light Meal
6:15-7:00pm Update from Transportation Advocacy Group
7-8:00pm Advocacy Groups

November 18th

5:30-6:00pm Light Meal
6:00-7:00pm Advisory Board Meeting
7-8:00pm Advocacy Groups

December 16th

5:30-6:15pm Light Meal
6:15-7:00pm Updates from Health Care and Wage Theft
Advocacy Groups
7-8:00pm Advocacy Groups

January 13th

The Micah Center's Response to the Biblical Call to do Justice:
A Conversation Facilitated by Albert Hamstra, Micah Center
Board President

February 3rd

What St. Ignatius Has to Offer Social Justice Advocates
Jordan Bruxvoort, Micah Center Director

March 3rd

Our Babies are Dying: A Panel Discussion Regarding the Racial
Disparity in Infant Mortality Rates in Kent County
The Micah Center Health Care Advocacy Group

April 7th

Homelessness Simulation
The Micah Center Poverty/Hunger Advocacy Group
Hosted at Degage Ministries

May 5th

Immigrant Worker Injustice: How our Broken Immigration
System Facilitates Worker Exploitation
The Micah Center Wage Theft Advocacy Group

January 20th

5:30-6:15pm Light Meal
6:15-7:00pm Updates from Fair Lending and Education
Advocacy Groups
7-8:00pm Advocacy Groups

February 17th

5:30-6:00pm Light Meal
6:00-7:00pm Advisory Board meeting
7-8:00pm Advocacy Groups

March 17th

5:30-6:15pm Light Meal
6:15-7:00pm Update from Poverty/Hunger Advocacy Group
7-8:00pm Advocacy Groups

April 21st

5:30-6:15pm Light Meal
6:15-7:00pm Update from Creation Care Advocacy Group and
Safe Places Alliance
7-8:00pm Advocacy Groups

May 19th

5:30-6:00pm Light Meal
6:00-7:00pm Advisory Board meeting
7-8:00pm Advocacy Groups

What is the Micah Center?

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and the needy. — Proverbs 31:8-9

The Micah Center exists to educate people about the biblical call to do justice and how they can respond to that call in their local community. It accomplishes this work by hosting a monthly lecture series on biblical justice and applications to current issues; by facilitating advocacy groups that study issues, educate others, and advocate for policies that advance the cause of justice in areas such as poverty, the environment, health care, worker justice, and criminal justice; and a speakers bureau and library of resources on these issues.

Its name is a reference to Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

The work we do is a response to the call in Proverbs 31: 8 & 9, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”



Micah Center
c/o Hope Church
2010 Kalamazoo Avenue, SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49507

www.themicahcenter.org