



TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN, MUCH IS EXPECTED

Interfaith Worker Justice and Wal-Mart Watch prepared this resource for Higher Expectations Week, November 13-19, 2005. Higher Expectations Week is a time of concentrated examination of how the Wal-Martization of the U.S. economy affects everyone. For more information about plans for Higher Expectations Week, contact Rev. Jarvis Johnson at jjohnson@walmartwatch.com or visit the Wal-Mart Watch website at <http://walmartwatch.com>. For more resources related to Wal-Mart and faith-based labor information, contact Ms. Kristi Sanford at ksanford@iwj.org or visit the IWJ website at www.iwj.org.



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Lech Lecha
Genesis 12:1-17:27
Excerpt of the assigned
Torah portion

Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together, and there was strife between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.

Should we be calling upon Wal-Mart to be a good employer and a good neighbor? Do corporations have a responsibility to be responsible? What should people of faith say?

As people of faith we can easily answer these questions. All of our faith traditions – Christian, Jewish, Muslim – have statements urging employers to pay wages that can support families, provide benefits for families, ensure that workers are treated with respect and dignity on the job, guarantee workers' right to organize, and challenge sweatshops at home and abroad.

In our traditions, "to whom much is given, much is expected." As the largest employer in the nation, Wal-Mart is able to and does establish the national standards for work. We believe, call upon, and expect Wal-Mart to establish:

- **Family wages:** Work compensation must be measured not only as reimbursement for individuals, but as a means to allow workers to raise their families in dignity. Wal-Mart, to whom much has been given, must help establish high standards for family wages.
- **Family health care:** Because of Wal-Mart's size, it is a large purchaser of health care. Unfortunately, too many Wal-Mart workers do not qualify for health care or cannot afford it under Wal-Mart's terms. Wal-Mart, to whom much has been given, must set a new standard for family health care.
- **Respect and dignity on the job:** Workers are not just employees, they are human beings created in the image of God. Each worker, regardless of his or her position, deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Wal-Mart, to whom much has been given, must create human resource policies that are as superior as its competitive pricing structures.
- **Right to organize:** All major faith traditions support the rights of workers to organize into unions and associations of their choice, without harassment and interference. Wal-Mart, to whom much has been given, must guarantee that workers can make a choice without pressure and intimidation.
- **Challenging sweatshops:** As one of the largest worldwide purchasers of products, Wal-Mart, to whom much has been given, must become a leader in fighting sweatshop and child labor around the world.

Wal-Mart is not an ordinary company. It is a trendsetter. It is a pioneer.

We call upon Wal-Mart to become an ethical leader, paving the way for family wages and benefits, good jobs, and challenging sweatshops. Wal-Mart has been given much. Much is expected!

The Sacred Texts of the Abrahamic Branches

Within the Christian tradition, the Catholic Church and several mainline Protestant denominations have agreed upon common texts for most of the worship services throughout the year. This group of texts is called the Common Lectionary.

For November 13th, the assigned texts are Judges 4:1-7, Psalm 123, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, and Matthew 25:14-30. Alternative texts used within some traditions include Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 and Psalm 90:1-11. These alternative texts provide insight on issues of wealth and righteous living.

The Gospel and Epistle lessons are printed in this resource. The assigned readings for synagogue are also included in this resource, listed as the Lech Lecha (Torah portion) and the Haftarah (prophetic portion). The Qur'an does not have assigned texts, but portions of the Qur'an that might be applicable are also printed in this resource.

Many are asking why the faith community should get involved in the fight to improve Wal-Mart's business model. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men [and women] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation." Progress will only come when people of good will stand for those who suffer unduly from economic subterfuge, deficient health care plans, and inconsolable environmental practices.

All religions believe in justice, and justice is only relevant when all individuals are seen with significance and not as chattels of the new corporate plantation. If we are the voice for the oppressed, the working poor, and the down trodden, then our voices must be heard as the clarion sound of justice.

But, why Wal-Mart? Rev. James M. Lawson Jr., President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (both in Los Angeles) stated, "With 1.2 million U.S. workers, Wal-Mart is reshaping the American workplace. Its Supercenters are being built where productive factories once stood, and middle-class workers are now competing for jobs as all-night cashiers, making a fraction of their former wages. The Wal-Mart model of low costs, underwritten by low wages, has cast a shadow on Dr. King's dreams of an American economy that provides stability and prosperity for all workers. Just as the Memphis sanitation workers were asked to work without dignity, so too are Wal-Mart's."

Wal-Mart made over \$10 billion in net income in 2004. The Walton family, worth \$90 billion, is the richest family in America. Wal-Mart can afford to pay a living wage and offer decent health benefits. But they will only do so if we stand together to make them accountable.

During "**Higher Expectations Week**" beginning November 13th, the prophetic reading of Isaiah 40:27-41:16 is preached. According to the text, Isaiah says that "God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary,...but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up on wings like eagles." God has always used his change agents to free his people from slave wages as with Moses and lead them to the land of benefits and genuine well being as with Joshua.

The question is: When will the people of faith take up their responsibility and cry for those whose voice has been silenced? When will we facilitate the shake off of the shackles of coercion because people have been brainwashed into believing a slave wage job is a good job? When do we blow the trumpet of discontent for the discriminated women and men whose dignity has been trampled by the money-makes-right attitude? When do we rally for small business owners whose livelihood has been swallowed up by the goliath of retail? When do we cry out because of the reprehensible treatment of our environment by the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of big business? When do we scream for justice for the children who work in sweatshops to provide low price items? The Christian's sacred text says, "To whom much is given, much is required."

For this reason, we of the faith community must decide to stand for those who have been victimized by corporate greed and institutionalized classism. We must stand like Amos who cried, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." We must stand like Jesus who said, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink..." We must declare like Muhammad, "When you hire, compensate the worker and treat them fairly." We must stand like Theodore Roosevelt who declared, "This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in."

We must stand together with one voice until the common denominator is livable wages, adequate health care, equal treatment regardless of one's race, gender, or creed. We must, as King said, "Carve a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment." We must join the struggle with the community – for the community.

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The Wal-Mart model of low costs, underwritten by low wages, has cast a shadow on Dr. King's dreams of an American economy that provides stability and prosperity for all workers.

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Wal-Mart has transformed our adoration of cheapness into a billion-dollar business.

Haftarah

Isaiah 40:27-41:16
An excerpt:

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the Earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

When we begin to regularly hear the phrase, “the Wal-Martization of America,” we can be fairly certain that something worth our attention is taking place in our society. By now the shortcomings of Wal-Mart have been well rehearsed. Wal-Mart barely pays its workers a living wage. It effectively denies health benefits to all but a few of its higher paid administrative staff. It decimates businesses in small towns. It regularly violates established fair labor laws. It mercilessly squeezes the manufacturers of its products, often forcing them to move jobs overseas in their effort to survive.

The litany of offences seems endless. And yet Americans continue to shop at Wal-Mart and have come to acknowledge it as our country’s single largest employer. What goes on here?

We could conclude that Americans are more ignorant of the facts than we may want to believe. Perhaps the story of Wal-Mart’s transgressions has not been as well publicized as we thought. Or, perhaps, the people who shop at Wal-Mart find the one-stop shopping and the low prices so irresistible that they would rather not listen to the darker side of the Wal-Mart story.

Of course, there is always the possibility that Wal-Mart has been able to present its case more effectively than we have suspected. Upper managers claim that its work force is a happy one, that it gives employment to the aged, the young (sometimes too young), and to many who otherwise would remain unemployed. It can claim that its faults have been exaggerated by jealous competitors and by overzealous critics.

What has always struck me as imponderable is what happens to grocery workers at Kroger or Safeway. Told that their wages must be cut – in order to compete with Wal-Mart; told that their health benefits must be reduced – in order to compete with Wal-Mart; and told that they must cut back on their hours, and, perhaps ultimately be fired – in order to compete with Wal-Mart – what do so many of these workers do? They go out and shop at Wal-Mart! Why? Because it is cheaper!

In a way I admire this Gargantua called Wal-Mart. It has made an asset out of one of our least desirable vices – our greed. It has transformed our adoration of cheapness into a billion-dollar business. In doing so, it has undeniably provided a service to many shoppers who feel helpless in the face of rising prices and lower wages. Wal-Mart has recognized that millions of Americans simply need to purchase their food and supplies at the lowest possible price.

But something more is involved – something that should trouble every one of us. To put it simply, cheapness can come at a tremendous cost. We like to contrast cheap and quality. But a more troubling contrast is to examine cheapness in terms of its moral consequences. We need to look at fairness. We need to examine the havoc that an unquestioned pursuit of cheapness has upon justice and righteousness.

When the slashing of prices involves the slashing of jobs, then the cost is very high. When the slashing of prices involves the elimination of health benefits, the reduction of pensions, the creation of unsafe workplaces, then the cost is very high.

Our pursuit of low prices may be understandable, but when the religion of cheapness allows us to ignore the most basic of human needs, it is time to reexamine the values we profess to cherish. And it is time to examine our own actions too. What have we done to question a policy of growth that ignores jobs and safety and fairness?

Before our very eyes, we have witnessed a corporation grow so huge that its name has become a symbol of commerce in our country. The Wal-Martization of America may be a reality. But it is time for all of us to stop and look at the consequences of Wal-Mart’s actions. And of ours too!

“The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,” Shakespeare wrote so prophetically, “but in ourselves.” We can pray that Wal-Mart will examine with increasing seriousness the impact it is having upon our society. And while we call for more corporate responsibility on the part of Wal-Mart, we could well look at how all of us are complicit in the traumatic changes that even now are shaking our country and undermining its time honored values.

Wal-Mart is the largest retail store in the world; it is playing a cutting edge role in defining the “new economy”: low wages, longer working hours, little or no health or welfare benefits, an alienated workforce, and the conversion of society and communities into atomized, isolated consumers that “shop till they drop.” The exploitation induced by ‘Wal-Martization,’ while horrific in the United States, is even greater in the Chinese (and other Two-Third World countries’) factories where most of the direct producers of Wal-Mart’s products work and live.

Contrary to the demands of the powerful, religions – including Islam – do have something to say about matters beyond ritual, peace, and charity. So, why would Islam be critical of Wal-Mart and the Wal-Martization of society?

First, the Wal-Martization of human society is the antithesis of the Islamic view wherein human beings have an intrinsic and inherent dignity in their role as the vicegerents of God (Qur’an 2:30) and the carriers of God’s spirit blown into us at the time of creation. The Wal-Martization of society reduces human beings to *homo oeconomicus*, economic man, whose complete loyalty must solely be to market imperatives of profit and consumption. The Islamic view of humanity rejects the notion of market-driven compensation that reduces workers to soul-less bodies ready to auction themselves to the highest bidder.

Second, the elevation of a false “right” to cheap and endless consumption is in direct opposition to God’s insistence on justice. “And God has created the heavens and the earth in truth,” says the Qur’an, “and so that every human being will earn its just recompense and that it may not be wronged” (45:22).

The idea of the right of consumers to cheap goods is both artificial and false. While simplicity is a value that believers are expected to cultivate in their lives for spiritual and personal growth, as well as for environmental justice reasons, the right to cheap goods is a rather different, even contrary, value. It is artificial because it entails the re-construction of sacred persons as mere consumers. It is false because, if it were really consumers that owners were interested in, lowering their own profits would more quickly achieve this end.

In addition, the notion of a “free market” dictating low wages and increasingly miserable working conditions for labor is itself a falsehood. As the Qur’an mentions on several occasions, the powerful and their hired ideologues persistently cover up the truth in order to maintain the population’s consent to an unjust status quo. The market’s functioning is entirely skewed by the enforcement, or lack thereof, of social policy by governments that often seem much friendlier to the Wal-Mart of our world than to labor.

Third, the obsession with mass production of consumer goods, with limitless growth and ever-expanding size, is the antithesis of the religio-ethical universe of Islam. The characteristic of omnipotence that Muslims consider only God to hold is being assumed by Wal-Mart and its imitators. In this “new economy” spearheaded by the world’s largest retail store, one atomized individual at a time is presented the key to salvation: work hard to accumulate and, more importantly, reverse IT that allows you to accumulate so much stuff! The Qur’an warns that the fetish to compete on the basis of how much one can accumulate and consume is unacceptable when it says in chapter 102 that “Rivalry in worldly increase distracts you, Until ye come to the graves. Nay, but ye will come to know.”

Fourth, the Qur’an posits kindness and charity as an addendum to justice, not a substitute for it. Wal-Mart makes a great hoopla of its acts of generosity, its donations to those in need and to friendly causes. Generosity is to be welcomed; when, however, it becomes a substitute for just labor relations and the right to collective bargaining, it becomes something to be spurned.

The injustice at the very heart of the character of Wal-Martization would need to be addressed, with exhaustive restructuring necessary to favor those whom God and his Prophets have preferred, the weak and marginalized. The onus ought to be on

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Selections from the Qur’an

Woe to those that deal in fraud. Those who when they have to receive by measure, from men exact full measure, but when they have to give by measure, or weight to men, give less than due.
Holy Qur’an 83:1-3

Give full measure when you measure out and weigh with a fair balance. This is fair and better in the end.
Holy Qur’an 17:35

Men shall have the benefit of what they earn, and women shall have the benefit of what they earn.
Holy Qur’an 4:32

I will not waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female, the one of you being from the other.
Holy Qur’an 3:194

Selections from A Manual of Hadith

When you hire, compensate the workers and treat them fairly.

“Three persons,” Muhammad said, “would be my enemies on the day of resurrection: one who promises and then violates it, one who sells a free man and makes his living from it, and one who employs a person to do work, takes sufficient work from him, and does not pay him his [just] wages.”

companies like Wal-Mart to fulfill their role as just employers who provide decent wages and benefits, rather than on the public purse which is compelled to subsidize the consequences of Wal-Mart’s disempowering workplace relations and impoverishing remunerations.

Fifth, the Qur’an presents an obsession with wealth as injurious to the well-being of all people. Resisting the Wal-Martization of society, while very much about the rights of underpaid and mistreated workers, is also about a struggle to reclaim the humanity of the owners.

According to the Qur’an, the obsession with wealth detracts one from following the path that leads to God and provides one with an illusionary sense of eternity. “The desire for abundance and increase [in wealth, status, and other worldly possessions] distracts you until you visit your graves” (102.1-2). “Woe to [the one] who amasses wealth and counts it, thinking that his wealth will enable him to live forever! By no means!”

The call for worker justice is thus also a call to humanize the owners. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Help your companion whether he is the doer of wrong or wrong is done to him.” His companions said, “O Messenger! We can help a person to whom wrong is done, but how could we help him when he is the doer of wrong?” He said, “Take hold of his hand from doing wrong.”

The onus ought to be on companies like Wal-Mart to fulfill their role as *just* employers who provide decent wages and benefits...

The parable of Jesus related in Matthew 25:14-30 describes how the rich get richer. A master entrusts varying amounts to three slaves based on their abilities. He expects them to use this opportunity well, while he is away, and make him a profit. Very likely many would judge him a clever, industrious, enterprising businessman. Such is our culture. Work hard and you will do well.

That was not the culture of Jesus' listeners. They were peasants barely eking out a living. They would see this master as arrogant, opportunistic, greedy, and rapacious. The master even agrees with the slave's description of him, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew that I was a harsh man, reaping where I did not sow, gathering where I did not scatter seed. You should have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest."

Did the master not hear the slave say, "I was afraid"? Or did he not care? Or did he see fear to be an incentive to try harder? Or did he not know fear can be overwhelming when survival is threatened not only for oneself but for family as well!

"I'm afraid." Sound familiar? Do we not hear that fear echoing throughout our own country? Do we not hear it resounding from countries where corporations first moved in order to cut costs, primarily labor, and then moved again for the same reason? Multiple Scripture passages, both Hebrew and New Testament, condemn this behavior scorchingly, "Woe to you rich (that is, greedy)..."

As children, one of the first truths we learned is that we are made in the image of God. This statement does not mean we look like God. Rather, we image God by acting in God-like fashion. The parable (Matthew 20:1-16) of the landowner who gave the laborers who worked one hour the same daily wage as those who worked the full day reveals the "excessive" generosity of God. To those who were paid last, who "grumbled" that it was not fair (perhaps we agree), the answer given is "Friend, I am doing you no wrong, did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage....I choose to give to the last the same as I gave to you...because I am generous." Fairness is a laudable human goal. God is astonishingly more generous than fair.

Daniel Berrigan, the well-known Jesuit social justice activist, has written about prayer. He says that too often our prayer is asking God to do for us what God has already given us in order to do what needs to be done. Too often prayer is petitioning God to act rather than thanking God for already giving us (individually and collectively) the power and the mission to act. God has answered our prayers before we ask. Believing that, we act.

At the Transfiguration, Peter, understandably, wanted to stay on the mountaintop basking in glory with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, only to be told that it was time to go back down the mountain and get on with the mission God has given them and us. Again at the Ascension (Jesus' disappearance, not departure), the disciples stood gazing upward only to be told to move on with the ministry.

"As defined by whom and measured by what?" is a question a colleague would often ask at the start of discussions that use familiar terms that have multiple meanings.

Power, for example, can be defined as the ability to act. The famous dictum of Lord Acton "Power tends to corrupt but absolute power corrupts absolutely" is often distorted by leaving out the word "tends" thus implying that power is bad rather than either good or bad depending on how it is used. Prayer is powerful because it is the ability and the pledge to act as God empowers us to act for the good, yet allows for our freedom to choose the bad.

Money is another measure. Paul, too, is often misquoted. "Money is the root of all evil" rather than "the love of money is the root of all evil." Like power, money can be for good or bad. Thus greed may be a more accurate term than love of money.

Jesus condemned publicly and witheringly the rich and powerful members of society who exploited workers, failing to treat them justly and with dignity. So too did the prophets of the Hebrew Testament. Indeed it has been said that all religions share the fundamental belief that we experience God in compassionate giving.

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Christian Tradition: Common Lectionary Gospel Reading

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

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**Christian Tradition:
Common Lectionary
Gospel Reading (cont.)**

Matthew 25:14-30

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you not, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

In his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II acknowledges that capitalism has some good points. But, the pope warns that by themselves market mechanisms do not ensure the just distribution of food and other goods that fulfill essential human needs. When capitalism relies on market forces alone, it creates a culture of consumerism that promotes selfishness and greed. Material goods should be shared by all. If by capitalism one means liberal – that is, a free market unconstrained by public authority and society – the pope condemns it unequivocally.

Tragically far too many corporations fail this test. One very much in the news is the largest and most profitable corporation in the world. Increasingly, Wal-Mart's practices are becoming known. A class-action suit by female employees is drawing attention to promotion policies. The wholesale shutdown of stores or departments that begin to organize unions demonstrates a visceral response to workers having a voice in the workplace. Business associations organize to keep Supercenters out of communities because of Wal-Mart's reputation for undercutting local businesses. Local governments try to establish ordinances to regulate Wal-Mart because its stores are a net drain on local economies.

Wal-Mart presents a smiley face to let the consumer carry the image of the happy experiences of all its constituents. But Christian scriptures warn the followers of Jesus to be wary. We are told in Matthew 7, "by their fruits you will know them."

The Last Judgment passage in Matthew (25:31-46) stunned me on hearing it my first year of seminary (at age 28). Previous readings did not register with me as this one did. Jesus includes no religious test in the usual understanding of the word. No "Did you believe in God?" "Did you believe in me?" "Did you pray?" "Did you go to church?" These were not the criteria listed. As important as we believe them to be, for Jesus they are not basic.

Essential is "Did you respond to the human needs of others, even the least of my and your sisters and brothers? Hungry ones, Thirsty ones, the ones who are Strangers, who are Naked, Sick, in Prison." Working to ensure that fundamental human needs are met in the measure of a life well lived.

Of course, we cannot do it alone. In fact, Christians believe that we cannot image God alone. For us God is three distinct persons and yet one. Therefore, it is only in relationship with others that we truly, visibly image God.

Wal-mart, here we come. However successful, may we continue to be faithful. Better to be on the right side and lose than on the wrong side and win.

Courage, this is only for a lifetime.

Jesus condemned publicly and witheringly the rich and powerful members of society who exploited workers, failing to treat them justly and with dignity. So too did the prophets of the Hebrew Testament.

This passage from 1 Thessalonians begins with a terrifying warning:

...The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!

When I was a child, I took such descriptions as long-range weather forecasts – lacking just enough precision to seem inevitable, like the change of seasons. My fear often overwhelmed the Vacation Bible School teachings about God's rainbow promise and Jesus calling children to his side to bless them.

Likewise, the parable of the talents made me nervous. I was raised to consider a good credit rating as bringing a person even closer to godliness than cleanliness. An investment riskier than a passbook savings account was viewed with suspicion. Making money through any method other than sweat and thrift was reckless wheeling and dealing. By those standards, the servant who buried her one talent was wisely cautious, doing her job and doing it well – certainly not deserving of casting into "outer darkness."

This heading-toward-final-judgment part of the liturgical calendar just made it hard for me to sleep at night.

The stated dramatic consequences of "living wrong" in these passages shouldn't be ignored. But we shouldn't lose the positive lessons that are also being given about our call to a different way of living in relation to God who isn't just in the End, or the Beginning, but is along for the ride through the long, bumpy Middle, too.

The choice about such things is left up to us. We can live like God is ineffectual or nonexistent, meaningless to our days and nights. We can live like God is important – and utterly brittle, so that we don't dare risk making a mistake – like our lives are fine china on loan from Grandma, and her rage about a broken plate would destroy us.

How is the world distressed and battered, even threatened with ending, through the belief that God isn't there or doesn't matter? What outer darkness do we create for ourselves and others out of our fear and the burying of gifts?

These cosmic questions are often answered in the mundane details of daily living: How do we treat the other commuters on the road? How do we share what we have with the widow, the orphan, and the downtrodden? How do we spend our "talents," – both our skills and our money? How do we shop – where do we get our detergent, t-shirts, even our...pickles?

Yes, even pickles can have something to do with how we live faithfully. In the December 2003 issue of *Fast Company* magazine, Charles Fishman uses a gallon jar of whole Vlasic brand pickles as an example of the phenomenal and far-reaching power of the world's largest retailer, Wal-Mart.

When Vlasic agreed to supply jumbo jars of pickles that Wal-Mart priced at \$2.97, almost a give-away, the customer response was frenzied. So frenzied that Fishman writes that it "distorted every aspect of Vlasic's operations, from farm field to factory to financial statement."

The popularity of the jumbo pickle jars cut into Vlasic's other more profitable product lines. Wal-Mart refused to raise the sale price of the jumbo jars even a small amount, so while Vlasic's sales numbers went up, its profits nose-dived.

Wal-Mart demands that its suppliers help Wal-Mart provide the lowest prices to its retail customers – even if ultimately those demands cut into suppliers' profits so deeply that they can't afford to pay their own workers. This way of doing business has driven other Wal-Mart suppliers to close U.S. plants and ship jobs overseas – because even as Wal-Mart squeezes them, the companies can't afford to lose business with the behemoth retailer.

Five members of the Walton family, owners of Wal-Mart, were tied for number 4 on *Forbes'* magazine's 2004 list of richest Americans. Yet many of Wal-Mart's *full-time* employees make less than the annual federal poverty guideline for a family of four.

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Portions of this sermon appeared in Living the Word: Reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary, published by Sojourners.

Christian tradition: Common Lectionary Epistle Reading

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

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**Christian tradition:
Common Lectionary
Epistle Reading (cont.)**

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

All this, to ensure “low everyday prices.” As Fishman puts it in that *Fast Company* article, few outside of Wal-Mart and their suppliers understand the “high cost of those low prices.”

In order to save up that talent until the master comes, I, the thrifty shopper, go for the jumbo jar of the cheapest pickles I’ve ever seen – instead of investing a bit more in farmers, farm workers, pickle packers, and truckers by going down the road and paying a bit more for my kosher dills. And the Walton family, with an estimated \$18 billion each in net worth, is thrifty and conservation-minded with their talents as well. One estimate is that they could pay each of their employees \$1 more an hour while maintaining their current profitability level, just by increasing prices a half penny a dollar.

Imagine if they went beyond this and made some real investment of their talents – then perhaps most of their employees could even afford health insurance! And us shoppers would still get a bargain – prices that are affordable, but that also allow for the just compensation of all who worked to bring a given product to the store.

What outer darkness do we create for ourselves and others out of our fear and the burying of gifts? How do we wound our neighbors by taking into account the price of something, but not the cost?

Yet there is another way. We can live like what we have – existence, talent, gifts of wit or welding – came from Someone who loves us, and a new day is a gift too, calling us out to take chances and plant seeds, to see what grows. To invest, not hoard.

Paul follows the words of warning quoted at the beginning of this sermon with words of instruction to the young, struggling, but faithful community at Thessalonica, words of power, not of fear: Don’t worry about thieves in the night if you are being children of the light. Keep awake; make faith, love, and salvation your defense. Most of all encourage one another and build one another up.

Wal-Mart demands that its suppliers help Wal-Mart provide the lowest prices to its retail customers – even if ultimately those demands cut into suppliers’ profits so deeply that they can’t afford to pay their own workers.

Returning the Ladder: One Community at a Time

Selling the Ladder but Not the Rungs

Religious communities have a high stake in the health and wellness of the community. People of faith have dedicated lives to bringing food to the hungry, pardon to the imprisoned, shelter to the homeless, and justice to the oppressed.

Religious communities have also been a prophetic voice when workers are not adequately compensated or consumers are taken advantage of. Sacred scriptures and traditions have long been concerned for the well being of the worker.

With today's highly centralized economies, it is not surprising that Big Box retailers gain strength. Nor is it surprising that the religious community responds to injustices created in the wake.

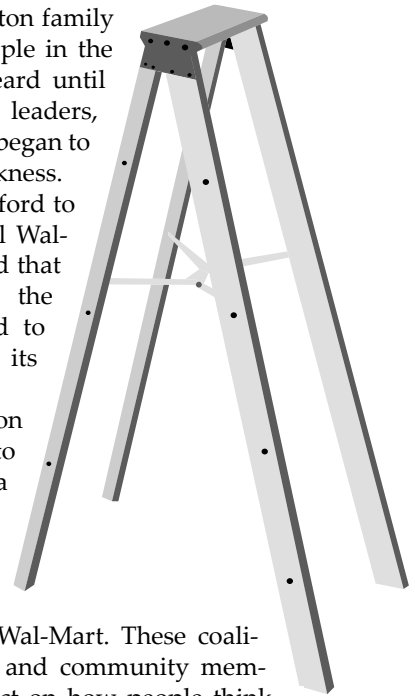
Wal-Mart has become one of the primary symbols of the inequities of the current economic system. While touting low prices, less is heard from them about low wages that result in full-time employees relying on public services for food aid and health care. Less is heard about low wages in the poor countries where workers, sometimes children, work many hours a day at very low wages to make the stuff that results in low prices. Less is heard about the stable meat-cutting jobs lost at local grocery stores when a Supercenter opens and leads to a two percent drop in employment in a community. Less is heard about the

four members of the Walton family in the top 10 richest people in the world. Well, less was heard until labor organizers, faith leaders, and community activists began to shine a light into this darkness.

Yes, most of us can afford to buy a ladder at our local Wal-Mart. But we have missed that Wal-Mart has removed the middle rungs. It is hard to climb a ladder missing its middle rungs.

We got a bad deal on that ladder. It's time to return it and ask for a refund.

Following are the stories from five IWJ affiliates involved in returning the ladder to Wal-Mart. These coalitions of religious, labor, and community members are having an impact on how people think about the way they shop. These leaders realize that they can heal the sick, feed the hungry, and ensure just wages for the worker. It's what they do.



Kansas City is Reclaiming Economic Democracy

Interfaith Worker Justice – Greater Kansas City has joined ReclaimDemocracy.org/KC, the Kansas National Organization for Women, UFCW Local 2, and Wake-Up-Wal-Mart in a campaign to draw attention to community concerns regarding Wal-Mart. In mid-August the coalition presented the documentary *Beyond the Wal* at a public event that stressed a back-to-school theme. The demonstration shined a spotlight on the exploitation of child labor in foreign markets and numerous violations of child labor law in the U.S.

The hour-long protest featured speakers, signs, colorful characters in costume, and lots of handouts for people to read. A twelve-foot-tall Wal-Mart puppet, constructed out of *papier mache* and a large blue cover, held strings attached to a professional dancer who was wearing a dress covered in barcodes. The puppet symbolized those Wal-Mart executives who treat employees as objects, not people.

Several ministers and religious leaders spoke about why the faith community is concerned with worker justice. Teachers spoke out against children buying Wal-Mart back-to-school items made by child

labor. In between these talks, the crowd chanted and sang songs calling for fair wages, health benefits, and an end to corporate welfare. Many anti-Wal-Mart buttons, shirts, and bumper stickers were sold to raise money for upcoming protests. The coalition is planning similar actions throughout the Kansas City area once a month until Wal-Mart changes its policy toward their workers.

This coalition has been active since the City of Kansas City proposed and later approved a \$27 million Tax Increment Financing District for the development of the Blue Ridge Mall into a Wal-Mart Supercenter. Local religious and labor leaders protested at the National Managers meeting of Wal-Mart held in Kansas City every January. These leaders, along with special guests like former Missouri Lieutenant Governor Joe Maxwell and National Grocers Association spokeswoman Donna Kennedy, also addressed the Planning and Zoning Committee of the Kansas City Council to encourage consideration of community concerns.

Methuselah Watch

Had Methuselah been an average Wal-Mart worker, he would have had to work his entire life to make almost as much money as Wal-Mart CEO H. Lee Scott makes in one year!

Let's review the math.

In 2004 Lee Scott was paid \$22,991,599 in total compensation, including stock options.

In 2004 the average "full-time" Wal-Mart associate was paid \$9.68 per hour for 34 hours per week (the number of hours considered "full time" according to the Wal-Mart Associate Handbook) or \$17,114 per year.

The average full-time Wal-Mart associate would need to work 1,343 years to make what Mr. Scott made last year.

Let's review the Scriptural texts.

In Genesis 5 of the Hebrew Scriptures, the life spans of several patriarchs are mentioned.

Adam	930 years
Lamech	777 years
Seth	912 years
Noah	950 years



And, the person whose name is the personification of long life, Methuselah, lived a *mere* 969 years.

None of these biblical heavyweights would be able to work at full-time jobs long enough to make the amount of money that Mr. Scott made in 2004. Even Methuselah would fall 374 years short of matching Scott's annual income.

Of course, Jesus lived only 33 years. Had he started as a greeter or stocker at a Wal-Mart instead of leaving the manger to head for Egypt with Mary and Joseph, he would have accumulated \$564,762 – one week's salary for Mr. Scott.

Doesn't it seem like the cashiers, greeters, drivers, forklift operators, and stockers could be paid a living wage? Could they join Mr. Scott in being covered by health insurance at an affordable rate? Jesus could heal the sick, so probably didn't need health insurance. But the rest of us....

Perhaps Methuselah just needed better health insurance.

When Prophets Confront Profits

Four Walton family members, the beneficiaries of Wal-Mart's profits, are tied for #4 on Forbes' list of the richest Americans with \$18 billion each.

Wal-Mart's employees – more than 70 percent of them women – are paid an average \$9.68 an hour if they are full-time employees. (The associate handbook lists 34 hours as full-time.) An average full-time Wal-Mart employee earns only \$17,114 annually, under the \$18,850 federal poverty guideline for a family of four in 2004.

In the top 100 cities where Wal-Mart's share of the grocery industry grew more than 20 percent between 1998 and 2002, the number of cashier jobs fell as much as 2.3 percent.

Every time Wal-Mart expanded its market share by one percent in the grocery business, retail food cashiers' wages dropped an average 5.5 cents per hour.

Full-time associates can choose to participate in a Wal-Mart health care plan after six months of continuous employment. (Part-time employees must wait two years.) But participation in the program can cost 42 percent of the associate's annual income before the benefits are even accessed. (For spouses to participate, the employee must pay all of the spouse's insurance plus a \$50 spousal surcharge.)

Wal-Mart drains the public coffers. In most states that keep the statistics, Wal-Mart is the employer of the most individuals working full time and still receiving public benefits in the form of food stamps, Medicaid, or housing subsidies.

Each Wal-Mart store employing 200 people costs taxpayers approximately \$420,750 annually in public social services used by Wal-Mart workers whose low wages and unaffordable health insurance mean most of them are among the working poor.

The Golden Rule – loving your neighbor as much as yourself – is not evident in these statistics.

Sources include Business Week magazine, the United Food and Commercial Workers website, The United States of Wal-Mart by John Dicker (Tarcher/Penguin, 2005), and "Everyday Low Wages: The Hidden Price We All Pay for Wal-Mart," a report by the minority staff of the U.S. House of Representatives Education and the Workforce Committee.

And to whomsoever much is given, much shall be required.

– Luke 12:48

Metropolitan Detroit Interfaith Looks to Penance for Purchasing

Three hundred people of faith have turned in their Sam's Club cards and traded them for Costco cards, thanks to the good outreach work of the Detroit Metropolitan Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues. Because in Detroit the Costco card costs about \$10 more than the Sam's Club card, the Anti-Sweatshop Campaign of the Metro Detroit Interfaith offered to give people the \$10 difference, although many were willing to pay the difference themselves. Metro Detroit Interfaith will be sending all the "turned in" Sam's Club cards to Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Another approach the Anti-Sweatshop Campaign of the Metro Detroit Interfaith has taken is to raise awareness about the "costs" of low prices through its Wal-Mart Tithing Box. Those who shop at Wal-Mart and benefit from its low prices are asked to contribute 10 percent of what is spent to the Wal-Mart Tithing Box. The money raised in the box is then contributed to a worker justice organization that works either here or abroad.

Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Detroit, pastored by Father Norm Thomas, chair of the Metropolitan Detroit Interfaith's Anti-Sweatshop Campaign, pushes this theme one step further. The church's reimbursement policy states that it won't reimburse parishioners for church-related expenses if the purchases were from Wal-Mart or Sam's Club.

Postcards as a Subversive Activity

The Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues (CICWI) has been raising support for the Big Box Living Wage Ordinance before the City Council. The Big Box Ordinance would guarantee workers a minimum living wage of about \$10 per hour and a minimum equivalent of \$3 per hour in benefits, would give priority to hiring from the local community, and would offer provisions for workers to organize.

CICWI has joined in a coalition with other concerned community groups spearheaded by the Grassroots Collaborative. The coalition is publicizing the ordinance and demonstrating community support through a postcard campaign. Bulletin inserts were sent out through the Chicago Catholic Archdiocese's Peace and Justice Newsletter, as well as the Chicago Lutheran Synod's e-bulletin and newsletter. CICWI has followed up with calls to different places of worship encouraging an engaged response by congregants.

CICWI's annual Labor in the Pulpits program prepared speakers to address the Big Box campaign in local congregations on Labor Day weekend. Members of organizations involved in the coalition volunteered to speak at their own congregation or other congregations identified through the postcard campaign and Labor in the Pulpits outreach. These speakers passed out the postcards as a means for congregational members to take action.

The Detroit Metropolitan Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues, through its Sweat-free World Campaign, has been distributing canvas bags that say "Wal-Mart: Costs You More...Always." In addition, the group has initiated a tithing box for those individuals who shop at Big Box corporations and feel guilty afterwards. The box is a form of penance, organizers say.



Strategies in the Twin Cities

Recent reports suggest one out of every 115 workers in the United States now works for Wal-Mart. This fact alone should give one pause on the effect of large employers and the type of jobs they offer. Living wages, affordable healthcare, and the right to organize are all pieces of good jobs that seem to be missing from the Wal-Mart puzzle.

So, what is the plan to shape up Wal-Mart? "The plan is simple; engage in short, focused, and regular campaigns that ask consumers to shop somewhere else besides Wal-Mart," says Bernie Hesse, organizer with UFCW Local 789 in Saint Paul, Minnesota. "The appeal will be around a theme, such as the recently concluded 'Send Wal-Mart Back to School Campaign' and will include information on why consumers should withhold their dollars from Wal-Mart." Local 789 soon will be kicking off a holiday shopping focus and creating materials about alternatives for the public.

A second part of the campaign involves legislative action and statewide discussion on corporate accountability and responsibility. In ten out of 12 states surveyed, Wal-Mart led the list for workers and dependents on public healthcare programs. "Fair Share Healthcare Legislation" will be directed at Big Box employers that don't provide basic, affordable healthcare for their employees. Efforts are underway to get the State of Minnesota to disclose which large employers are "piggy-backing" on state and federal healthcare programs.

Third, building coalitions with faith communities, small business owners, and neighborhood residents impacted by proposed Wal-Mart expansions is critical. Local 789 concentrated on this effort when a Wal-Mart recently stepped into an urban neighborhood. Grassroots organizing strategies around local control contribute to "smart growth."

"Finally, our campaign will continue to appeal to consumers and the idea that economic choices are moral choices," says Hesse. "Retail jobs can and should be living wage jobs that are not disposable or marginalized as unskilled. To paraphrase Rev. Martin Luther King, 'no job is menial if it pays well'."

A Litany for Ethical Consumers

Leader: We make simple yet profound choices, impacting our neighbors and ourselves.

People: **As we enter into decision, let our decision be divinely inspired by our prophets, our prayers, and our Lord.**

Leader: Shall we turn and look into the faces affected by our choices, or shall we turn away?

People: **Let us turn and look into the eyes of our neighbors as we make our choices.**

Leader: In the workplace, shall we choose poverty wages with poor or absent health care? Shall we watch as masses of full-time workers rely on public income support programs just to survive?

People: **In the workplace, we shall choose living wages and quality health care – restoring the dignity of full-time work.**

Leader: In the workplace, shall we choose environmental devastation in the name of short-term profit?

People: **We know that patience and long-term vision brought us in our faithfulness, beyond certain death, unto the glory of new life. We know that the cheapest deal is often deadly over time.**

Leader: Shall we ask forgiveness from on high for our shortsightedness, knowing that we always can begin again?

People: **Oh Lord and Holy Vision, rattle our dry bones, kindle flame within our hearts, and work forgiveness into the very soil on which we tread.**

Leader: Through our faith traditions, the Spirit moves us to justice and health against all odds. Together we invoke the tremors of righteousness, and together we shall move mountains.

People: **Let us link arms, open our hearts, and remember that in faith we move mountains!**

Unison Prayer

You who whisper from on high and from deep within the recesses of a breaking heart,

You who shield the weak in strength to make leaders and prophets out of them,

We stand in thanks for blessings uncounted and dreams already real.

Move into our lives as we contemplate simple yet profound choices,

Be as healing water freshly fallen onto dust, flowing into cracked and blistered earth,

Wield in us awareness of our worth and dignity,

Remind us that in your image are we created, and that we are stewards of your world,

Give us courage as we take the longer view – as we choose to walk together in unity for justice and for righteousness that will be peace.

Amen.



Dude, Who Took My Job?

Is it possible to win a campaign against a corporation as big and powerful as Wal-Mart? Last year, IWJ affiliate Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) in Los Angeles did just that. Wal-Mart wanted to put a new superstore in Inglewood, California, a predominantly African-American and Latino suburb of L.A. The city council respected the community's wishes and rejected Wal-Mart's bid. The company responded with a well-funded campaign to circumvent the city council's decision with a ballot initiative.

CLUE responded by working with the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy to organize a large-scale opposition campaign in which Inglewood's clergy played a major role. According to Rev. Oliver Buie, a Christian Methodist Episcopal minister, it took some effort to build relationships with the city's clergy, but religious leaders were ultimately receptive to CLUE's message: "You may pay lower prices in the store, but in the long run, you won't have good jobs in the community."

Wal-Mart outspent community and religious groups ten to one, but the community had sprung into action. CLUE and its allies held press conferences and rallies, distributed fliers, held town hall



Rev. Altagracia Perez (left) finishes exhorting community members involved in an effort in Inglewood, California, to stop Wal-Mart from rezoning an area in order to build a superstore. The effort was ultimately successful.

meetings, and met with political leaders. And it worked. On April 6, 2004, people of faith and the Inglewood community emerged victorious with more than 60 percent of the vote.

Watching Wal-Mart

The outsourcing of jobs, shifting of responsibility for low pay to the public sector, and conducting of anti-union campaigns, is now often called the "Wal-Martizing of America." *Wal-Mart Watch* was launched in the spring of 2005 to address the related corporate activities of the world's largest retailer.

Wal-Mart Watch is "challenging Wal-Mart to become a better employer, neighbor, and corporate citizen," says Rev. Jarvis Johnson, Director of Interfaith Outreach for Wal-Mart Watch. The organization will connect, support, encourage, and focus the myriad efforts already underway across the country.

In just a few short months, Wal-Mart Watch has demonstrated its effectiveness. The *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* in June, 2005, said of Wal-Mart Watch, "Perhaps no other group is scrutinizing the company more thoroughly than Wal-Mart Watch."

Now Wal-Mart Watch is launching Higher Expectations Week from November 13 to 19, 2005. Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton once said, "High expectations are the key to everything" Wal-Mart Watch wants to hold Wal-Mart to Walton's standard.

"Higher Expectations Week kicks off a nationwide campaign to make Wal-Mart a more responsible corporate citizen," says Johnson. "People can sign the Wal-Mart Watch pledge to hold Wal-Mart accountable to higher expectations." Wal-Mart Watch lists the following types of activities on its website <http://walmartwatch.com>:

- more than 1,000 events planned by 200 national and local partners,
- 3,500 house parties to premiere Robert Greenwald's new film *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices*, and
- creation of a legislative task force to strengthen efforts by federal, state, and local officials to reform Wal-Mart.

Lee Scott, CEO of Wal-Mart, said in June, 2005, "[T]oday, we're the focus of one of the most organized, most sophisticated, most expensive corporate campaigns ever launched against a single company." He is aware of the "higher expectations."

For more information, visit the IWJ website (www.iwj.org) or the Wal-Mart Watch website (<http://walmartwatch.com>), or fill out the information form on the back page and send/fax it to IWJ.

What People of Faith Can Do About Wal-Mart

People of faith are concerned about the standards Wal-Mart is setting for the nation and often ask, "What can I do?" Below are five concrete things you and your congregation can do:

1) **Organize a group in your home or congregation to watch** the *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices* movie. This movie is a great education and discussion starter. To order a copy of the DVD, visit www.walmartmovie.com.

2) **Lead a small delegation of religious and community leaders** to meet with the manager of your local Wal-Mart. Ask the manager about the wages and benefits paid in the store. If you get the information, you can compare the answer with what it takes to raise a family in your community. Just asking the question demonstrates community concern about these core issues and will surely be conveyed to the regional and national management. Visit <http://walmartwatch.com> for more information.

3) **Encourage your congregation to publicly choose Costco** for its bulk purchases. If the congregation has a Sam's Club membership (the bulk purchasing club owned by Wal-Mart), switch from Sam's Club to Costco. Costco pays significantly higher wages and health care benefits and allows workers the right to

organize. The contrast between the two companies is quite dramatic and demonstrates the difference leadership can make on improving working conditions. If your congregation intentionally chooses Costco, please:

- Inform Interfaith Worker Justice so it can publicize your choice.
- Send a letter to both Costco and Sam's Club explaining your choice. Sample letters are available at www.iwj.org.
- Send a press release about your congregation's choice to area newspapers and your denomination's publications. A sample press release is available at www.iwj.org.

4) **Participate in campaigns seeking community benefit agreements.** Whenever Wal-Mart wants to open a new store, it is an opportunity to get commitments from the company about wages, benefits, and working conditions. For a list of the current campaigns, visit www.wakeupwalmart.org.

5) **Support city and state legislation** that requires higher standards for large employers. In the Spring of 2006, 35 state legislatures will consider state legislation requiring large employers to either provide health insurance for their workers or pay into a state fund to help their workers. This legislation will help many Wal-Mart workers as well as many others. Similarly, some cities are considering "Big Box" ordinances that would set wage and benefit standards for big box stores, such as Wal-Mart or Home Depot, that operate in the cities.

Is your congregation participating in the Wal-Mart Week of Action? Tell us!

Tear out, photocopy, or create your own form and send it to IWJ, attention Chase Gentile, 1020 W. Bryn Mawr, 4th Fl., Chicago, IL 60660, or fax to (773) 728-8409, or email to cgentile@iwj.org.

Name of organization (please print legibly)

Contact name

Title

Address

City/State/Zip

Daytime Phone

Evening Phone

Fax

E-mail

Website

Please feel free to suggest other organizations for IWJ to contact:

IWJ will share this information with Wal-Mart Watch for its planning purposes.

Wal-Mart's behavior can be changed by exerting economic, public, and legislative pressure on the company. Throughout the nation, a growing movement is educating the public about the effect of the world's largest retailer on communities. In a few short months, thousands of activists have signed up at <http://walmartwatch.com>.

A Litany for Ethical Consumers was graciously contributed by Rev. Teran Loeppke, a graduate of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary.



WAL-MARTWATCH

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