Introduction

At a southern university rally for living wages in 2005, a middle-aged African American woman rose to introduce herself and speak to the crowd. Standing there in her uniform, she stated her name and job title (custodian), then paused before saying slowly and deliberately, “Everyone keeps telling me not to speak today. They say I’ll lose my job or not get my raises. But I’m telling you today that I’m not afraid. There’s nothing they can do to me, with God on my side.” In front of a hundred students, faculty, and other staff, she relayed her story of working two jobs, one of them full time, to feed her daughter and take care of an aging mother. She expressed her frustration at not having enough time with her family, with her seemingly ceaseless work. With strength and clarity in her voice, she ended by stating her hope for “a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work.”

Later that year, the local African American ministerial fellowship and an influential Unitarian Universalist church, joined by many university faculty and staff members, wrote to the university’s chancellor, strongly pressing the wealthy institution to understand living wages as a moral issue with significant related concerns for racial justice. As the campaign grew, faith leaders led rallies, supported workers who risked speaking publicly, and provided organizing space for meetings. By the end of the union contract negotiations, the workers had secured a guaranteed starting rate of $10 an hour by 2009.

While religious persons and organizations were not the whole story in this campaign, every major actor in the coalition acknowledged religious activists’ role in its success. In fact, to ignore religious activists’ multiple contributions to the campaign would be to miss a major dimension of the campaign and its later influence on the rise of a faith-labor coalition for living wages, for city workers, those contracted through the metropolitan government, and other low-wage workers who sought their help.
Introduction

Religious Foundations of the U.S. Living Wage Movement

Whether the campaigns are at a university, business, city, or state level, persons of faith and religious organizations regularly play important, but generally under-analyzed, roles in the living wage movement in the United States. The contemporary living wage movement emerged in the early 1990s from the grassroots coalition of churches in Baltimore, Maryland. These churches, which provided social services to the poor in Baltimore during this time, noticed a disturbing trend. In spite of national rhetoric about growing prosperity and a booming stock market, more people were showing up at church soup kitchens, clothes closets, and rental assistance programs. And more of them had full-time jobs. Over spaghetti dinners in church basements, people talked about trying to survive and provide for their families on inadequate full-time wages. As stories accumulated and patterns emerged, a coalition of forty-six Baltimore churches decided they had seen enough. As members of Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), a congregation-based community organizing network affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the churches activated their organizing model to address the pressing issue in their community of working poverty. Having identified the problem through one-on-one conversations and congregational leadership teams, they created a group to research the possible causes of “working poverty” in their city and to plan for action. What they found both confirmed their instincts and alarmed them: the city of Baltimore and its downtown redevelopment strategies were themselves responsible for the new low-wage jobs.

Like many cities in the United States, Baltimore in the late 1980s and early 1990s sought to revitalize its downtown through a series of financial incentives and public subsidies to private firms in order to encourage investment in new office, hotel, and residential projects, which would remake the downtown district. In 1981, the newly elected President Reagan had cut seven billion dollars in aid to municipalities; as a result many cities were forced to cut budgets, and they turned to federally funded “urban renewal” programs, which offered interest-free grants for private redevelopment in targeted urban areas. When most of that federal funding ended in 1987, cities turned to alternate strategies in the form of tax incentives and subsidies for downtown redevelopment. Proponents argued that local government assistance would, in the long term, result in
additional tourist dollars, a larger tax base, and a more stable local economy. Yet despite two billion dollars in subsidies for the downtown Baltimore hospitality industry during the 1980s, the percentage of working Baltimoreans living in poverty continued to increase.

The BUILD network identified three primary problems through their research on the city’s working poverty. First, private companies involved in government urban renewal projects were paying low wages in order to win low-bid government contracts. The government’s own system of contracting rewarded poverty-level job creation in order to “save” the government money. Second, tax abatements and other subsidies given by the city went to private firms that paid workers at or barely above minimum wage. No criteria in government subsidies compelled contractors to meet a certain wage- or job-quality creation standard. Third, and simultaneously, the city was privatizing (that is, outsourcing) government jobs such as janitorial and food service. As a result, low-wage, private-sector contractors were replacing higher wage government jobs, which had often been unionized. Although Baltimore was indeed creating new jobs, they were primarily low-wage jobs with few benefits, which offered little hope of breaking the cycle of poverty.

In the 1980s, BUILD’s (and IAF’s) strategy had been to fight for housing and education subsidies for the urban poor. But as Arnie Graf, the East Coast director of the IAF, recalls, “We came to realize that we could not subsidize our way out of the crisis. And why did we need so much subsidy? Why do people who are working everyday need this subsidy in order to send their kids to school or buy a home? We had to get to the root of it. We had to deal with people’s work and wages.” Joining forces, BUILD and American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) identified the city itself as the major contributor to working poverty and called for an accounting of the “municipal subsidization of poverty.” The contrasts between the newly thriving urban corporate/hospitality sector and its surrounding impoverished neighborhoods thus became a moral rallying call for faith-based and union organizing in Baltimore.

Working with AFSCME, BUILD’s first legislative action was to encourage the mayor to pass a “right to organize” ordinance, which protected workers by voiding municipal contracts of those companies that fired workers for union organizing. This law opened the door for a strong labor organizing drive among privatized building-service workers, which built a power base for a new low-wage worker organization: the Solidar-
ity Sponsoring Committee, or simply Solidarity.  

While this legislative effort strengthened the union politically, religious activists’ involvement and framing were central from the beginning. In fact, at the launch of Solidarity, one of the local affiliated pastors, Rev. Vernon Dobson, proclaimed BUILD's support for the new organization with the passion of a shepherd protecting his flock: “The church is going to protect these workers. I have a message for employers—people who are upset because they don’t want to pay workers more money . . . who don’t want workers to organize. You keep your hands off these people because they are children of God.” 

Such was the public beginning of a primarily worker-run organization described as “a little bit of church, a little bit of union, a little bit of social service, and a whole lot of politics!”

The coalition of BUILD, AFSCME, and Solidarity created an even larger campaign in 1993 during a $165 million bond drive to renovate the Baltimore convention center. Together, these organizations launched the “Social Compact” campaign to demand that hotels and businesses funded by the new government bond offer higher wages and training. Because the development was made possible through public subsidies, BUILD argued that downtown businesses were obligated to create jobs that “would enable families to support themselves without having to rely on public subsidy.” 

Soon after, the coalition expanded its campaign to require all businesses that had contracts with the city to pay their workers at least a “living wage.”

Defining the living wage as a wage sufficient to lift a family of four above the federal poverty line ($14,350), religious activists and union organizers sought to create a different sort of campaign for a very different kind of ordinance. Rather than the usual rallying with the usual suspects, union leaders were invited into pulpits and religious leaders into union halls to emphasize the importance of this new kind of low-wage worker organizing and advocacy. Union and religious solidarity across economic class became a central theme for the campaign. Identifying businesses that received government subsidies but paid poverty wages, the coalition organized municipal subsidy tours in which they displayed huge price tags on buildings around the city, listing the amount of government subsidy each received and how little their workers were paid.

Priests and ministers, often in clerical collars, accompanied the tours and marched through major hotels denouncing those immense subsidies, occasionally going floor by floor to speak with custodial staff. The coalition also convinced some major convention clients to offer area hotels a
dollar more per room if that dollar would go directly into the salaries of workers. With strategies such as these, coalition activists worked with numerous laypersons, clergy, workers, and allies to make visible the seemingly invisible hands that were shaping the city’s economy. In so doing, they built the moral agency necessary to introduce a form of economic democracy and accountability into the dynamics of municipal politics. By “moral agency” I mean, most simply, the moral knowledge, judgment, and motivation to take actions related to the right and the good.

In December 1994, the Baltimore coalition of faith, labor, and community organizations managed to pass their municipal living wage ordinance. With a cost increase to city contracts of less than the rate of inflation, the ordinance set the minimum starting wage of all workers on city service contracts at $7.70 by 1998. While not a panacea for working poverty in Baltimore, the ordinance benefited approximately four thousand workers and established a political power base for those previously marginalized in the local economy.

The economist Deborah Figart and the political scientist Janice Fine, conducting separate studies of the Baltimore living wage campaign, concluded that faith-based activism was essential to the campaign’s success and emergent power base. When a local newspaper reporter aggressively questioned an activist about Baltimore’s new labor and religion alliance, the Christian activist, tired of being called a union puppet, quipped, “It is the church’s traditional role, its prophetic calling [and] if anyone has any problems with it, let them take it up with our chief organizer, Jesus Christ.” Local newspapers later described the clergy involved in the campaign as the “city’s collective soul fighting a holy war.” Empowered by its mission, BUILD lobbied gubernatorial candidates in 1998 to implement their “Joseph Plan” (referencing the Hebrew biblical character) that called for 20% of the state surplus be used for job creation and training whenever the state had three consecutive months of economic downturn. When Baltimore’s Democratic governor won reelection, in part because of BUILD’s get-out-the-vote drive, he established the plan and appointed BUILD’s lead organizer to chair it. This organization continued its work, winning the governor’s support for including college training in welfare-to-work requirements, constructing more than seven hundred affordable housing units, and seeking to establish a hundred-million-dollar affordable housing fund for low-wage workers. Solidarity, with the support of BUILD and AFSCME, also won an ordinance, which gave workers the right to stay on the job when contracts changed
hands, and an executive order that forbade full-time workers from being replaced by $1.50-an-hour workfare recipients. Solidarity eventually even established its own healthcare program and worker-run temp agency.24

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Baltimore campaign was its inspiration for a wave of living wage organizing across the nation for nearly two decades. Even before the Baltimore campaign was concluded, word spread about the success of this new organizing form and strategy, and activists in other cities began establishing their own coalitions for municipal living wages. Two other cities passed ordinances in 1995, three in 1996, and forty-four between 1997 and 2000.25 Since 1994, more than 144 municipalities and counties have enacted varied forms of living wage ordinances and at least thirty-four more campaigns are active at this time (not including university, state, and business sectors).26 Even opponents of living wage ordinances have acknowledged the movement’s powerful reach. In 2002, the former congressman Newt Gingrich invited corporate leaders to an “anti–living wage” conference, bemoaning that “In 2001 alone, advocates of a free market have lost one living wage battle every fourteen days on average.”27 Political power was shifting, and many conservative politicians, chambers of commerce, and corporations that relied on low-wage labor felt its tremors.

Baltimore’s model coalition of religious, labor, and low-wage worker organizations has been repeated in cities across the nation since 1994. Yet much of the academic analysis of the living wage movement has largely ignored the role of religious activists and their resources in the movement’s success. Often subsumed under the larger heading of “community coalitions,” religious activism is a neglected category of analysis in this seemingly secular movement. In fact, it largely disappears in the analytical gap between sociologists of social movements, who undertheorize the roles of religious activists, organizations, and ideology in social change, and religious ethicists, who focus on the abstract issue of living wages but not on the ethical practices of the movement itself. Here, we look at key practices of religious persons and organizations in the U.S. living wage movement, arguing that these practices build the moral agency—a person’s commitment and capacity to discern and work for the needs, rights, responsibilities and flourishing of oneself and others—of low-wage workers and their allies, and help mitigate the sociodemographic barriers that keep the working poor outside of public policy making. Enhancing moral agency is never easy work. But through practices such as moral framing, racial bridge-building, gendered leadership development, and ritual
enactment, religious activists help to build the moral agency necessary to imagine alternative policies for the working poor.

By analyzing religious activists in the living wage movement, we gain three major insights. First, we better understand the roles of religious activists and their ethical underpinnings even in a seemingly secular movement. In addition to the obvious invocations of religious rhetoric and ritual, we identify the more subtle and complex enactments of religion in social movement activism. We see, for example, the roles of religious leaders in reconciliation work among advocacy organizations that harbor deep divisions based on race and ethnicity. We also begin to notice the key leadership roles that women of faith play in the movement and their relationship to feminist organizations.

Second, we better understand the actual, rather than imagined or projected, challenges of ethics and agency that the movement faces, which can aid in its scope and effectiveness. Where must we draw on neoliberal economic models to make arguments for living wages, and where is it dangerous to do so? How might we address the deep “Brown/Black” divides among low-wage workers? In what ways might we address the staffing of the movement by underpaid women? How do we guard against religious ritual becoming manipulative political performance? Answering these questions can provide a perspective from which allies can contribute to the movement in valuable, integral ways.

Third, we begin to understand the movement’s goals more broadly, which helps us contextualize the movement in larger efforts toward the expansion of democracy in the United States, both politically and economically. In their work, religious activists are not merely mobilizing for a specific policy measure, however important it may be. They are also seeking and enacting an expanded vision of democratic polity founded on greater economic equity and representation. As these progressive people of faith embody it, religious activism seeks to cross barriers of public/private, race, class, and gender, and allows them to practice the polity they preach. While living wage campaigns often focus on one specific public policy measure, they also embody a larger goal of renewing democracy by cultivating broad-based moral agency focused on the political economy. Widening our analytical lens allows us to see the living wage movement as part of a larger vision of recent progressive religious activism (some term this the “religious left”), which seeks to reincorporate economic democracy into the dynamics of political representation in the United States. By paying attention to religious rhetoric and practice in this seem-
ingly secular movement, we are able to better understand the ethical and agential challenges involved in building a more inclusive democratic polity in this country and how religious sources might develop some of the moral agency necessary to navigate these challenges.

Listening to the Movement

This book arises out of several years of regular participant observation in living wage campaigns in Atlanta, Georgia, and Nashville, Tennessee, as well as periodic participant observation and primary document reviews of campaigns in Memphis, Tennessee, and San Diego, California. I chose Atlanta, Nashville, and Memphis because I have lived in (or nearby) these cities and became active in their campaigns. I complemented these sites geographically with San Diego because it sheds light on the dynamics of the Southwest with its enormous immigrant influx and diminished union density, without the “Bible belt” context of southern cities. San Diego was also the last major city in California to pass a living wage ordinance, which in fact points to the challenges that campaigns face in a more conservative but less “religious” political region.

Because the Atlanta, Nashville, and Memphis campaigns led to thicker description from a southern regional perspective, I offer some balance to this through extensive literature review, e.g. Orin Levin-Waldman, Stephanie Luce, or Jared Bernstein’s studies. However, this southern regional focus is an advantage in studying the living wage movement. The sociologist Isaac Martin, reporting on the diffusion of living wage ordinances, concludes that the southern regional location is one of the strongest factors deterring the passage of these ordinances. Before the Atlanta campaign, there had not been a living wage campaign in a major city in the South (unless one considers Miami). When the Atlanta coalition called Jen Kern, the director of the Living Wage resource center at the Association of Communities Organizing for Reform Now (ACORN) to ask her to lead a training session, she replied, “Atlanta, this is the phone call we’ve been waiting for.” Thus, the challenges and successes of southern campaigns offer particular insights into grassroots economic political activism in hostile environments.

My two years of participant observation in Atlanta (2001–3; ordinances passed in 2003 and 2005) included multiple campaign meetings, public rallies, city council sessions, campaign intern supervision, and a subsequent seminar session with two movement leaders through my academic
research group at Vanderbilt University. My ongoing involvement in the Nashville campaign is the most extensive, beginning in 2004 (resolution passed in 2010) and included numerous meetings, trainings, public rallies, supervisions of interns and personal consultations, the development of needs-based living wage estimates for community organizers, and the formation of an Interfaith Worker Justice affiliated committee. In my work on the Memphis campaign (2006–8; ordinances passed in 2006, 2007, 2008), I reviewed primary documents, attended two public rallies, and participated in strategic consultations with the executive director during the inception of the Nashville campaign. In the San Diego campaign (ordinance passed in 2005), I reviewed primary documents and, in 2007, consulted with campaign leaders on the development of the Nashville campaign.

At the national level (2004–8), I conducted primary document reviews and participated in two national annual conferences and seven smaller affiliate tele-meetings of two national faith-based economic justice networks, Interfaith Worker Justice and the National Council of Churches’ Let Justice Roll living wage campaign, which coordinate their work closely. Supplementing this participant observation, I conducted an extensive review of the academic, nonprofit, and advocacy literatures on the U.S. living wage movement.

**Centering Ethical Practices**

There is no attempt here to recount the complex technical dimensions of passing and implementing living wage ordinances or their financial impact. Instead, the focus is on how religious organizing builds economic political agency among those supporting the campaigns. There is also no attempt to outline, in a more abstract manner, all the ethical and political arguments for and against living wages. Our focus is instead on analyzing, evaluating, and learning from the organizing practices that religious activists use to build moral agency, in ways rarely discussed in the scholarly literature.

Maintaining the focus on religious practices is not meant to imply that by themselves, people of faith or religious organizations have caused, or been the tipping point for, the movement’s successes. Social movement theory is too complex to sustain the first claim, and the second would require quantitative research beyond the scope of this project. However, the current academic literature has largely ignored the presence
and practices of religious activists in the movement. This book seeks to address this gap, and centers on the argument that important lessons are available about the ways religious ideology and practices contribute to moral agency—again, a person’s commitment and capacity to discern and work for the needs, rights, responsibilities, and flourishing of oneself and others. Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, the director of California Clergy United for Economic Justice (CA CLUE), explains, “What do we hope for? Not just that a job is a better job. That’s not enough.” She describes a scene from the movie *Bread and Roses* in which the cleaning women reflect on how they do their jobs, disappearing into hallways and elevators, occasionally getting stepped over, and they comment wryly, “We have magic powers—to become invisible.” Salvatierra continues, almost as a benediction, on the purpose of low-wage worker organizing: “We want to say it is possible . . . we have the power to stop making people invisible.” Living wage campaigns, and the religious organizations that support them, seek to build the moral agency of workers and their allies to make low-wage workers visible and powerful in the U.S. political economy.

**Sustaining Moral Agency**

In 2006, an article in the *New York Times* and a segment on a PBS national television series featured several of the custodians who had risked their jobs during the 2005 university campaign mentioned earlier. They glowed with pride in the television segment as they told their stories of struggle and activism. They became mini-celebrities among allied staff, students, and faculty at the institution. But many of them later told stories of having their shifts changed, their sick days closely monitored, and continual disruptions to their work life after the union contract was signed. The female organizer for the union and her female divinity school intern reported being escorted off campus by police the following summer as they attempted to speak with workers at clock-ins. Union density dropped precipitously over the next two years.

Religious activists’ role in building the moral agency of many of the workers, their allies, and the coalition as a whole was significant in this campaign. But maintaining and developing that agency among those most marginalized is, at best, tenuous in our current political economy. Enhancing moral agency is hard work. In the United States, religious organizational involvement continues to be one of the few resources that
can mitigate political alienation based on race, education, and economic status. Understanding how religious involvement does this work for and with low-wage workers, the challenges religious activists face, and how we might better nurture the building of moral agency in relation to the political economy is at the heart of this book.

**Particularity and Religious Pluralism**

While multiple faith traditions in the living wage movement are discussed here, a core Christian focus runs through the text in two primary ways. First, Christian clergy and practitioners dominate the movement’s public self-presentation and staffing. Certainly rabbis (including the director of San Diego Interfaith Committee on Worker Justice [ICW]), imams, and laity from many faiths are present in the living wage movement and were active in my participant observations. Jewish foundations such as Jewish Funds for Justice and other local organizations also contribute financial and technical resources and skills to the movement. But as is true in much of American religious life, Christian practitioners and resources heavily influence the movement and tend to frame its public and private work; for example, even if the hymns that the movement uses remove specifically Christian language, the hymn as a worship form is still decidedly Christian.

Second, because my primary training and religious commitments are broadly Christian, I focus on the subtlety of Christian discourse more clearly and am more capable in offering constructive sources for its enhancement, thus clarifying possible Christian contributions to a pluralistic discourse on worker justice. The people of faith within the movement are primarily Christians, and they can enhance the depth of their contributions to multifaith dialogical conversations and moral agency by attending to the richness of their traditions and inviting others to do the same.

**Social Ethics and Accountability to Social Activism**

This book is aimed directly at a wide range of readers including sociologists of religion, social movement theorists, progressive religious activists and their allies, grassroots political strategists, those who study the intersections of race, gender, religion, and politics more generally, and Christian social ethics. It is of particular resonance for this latter field.
From its beginning as an academic discipline, Christian social ethics relied heavily on the social sciences, and on sociology in particular, to develop accounts and strategies for combating contemporary suffering and injustice. As the historian and ethicist Gary Dorrien explains, Christian social ethics began “as a successor to required courses in moral philosophy [and] approached ethics inductively as the study of social movements addressing social problems.” In fact, early twentieth-century academic social ethicists such as John Ryan, Henry Ward, and Walter Rauschenbusch collaborated with the incipient living wage movement to analyze its social concerns and enhance its theological arguments and movement practices. These ethicists were deeply concerned with enhancing the capacity of persons to discern and advocate for peoples’ needs, rights, and flourishing in the midst of often devastating work conditions. In drawing on sociology to understand the importance of moral agency and how it can best be cultivated by the living wage movement, we follow a long line of Christian ethicists who have partnered with social movements in order to understand and contribute to religious ethical practice.

While strict attention to social science and political intervention has become controversial in the larger discipline of Christian ethics, social ethicists continue to be “political, activist, and pragmatic” in their engagement of social issues. The goal of Christian social ethicists has been not just to advance the guild but also to transform social structures. Religious ethicists offer attentive eyes and analytical categories for understanding how religious resources help persons and communities construct their commitments and capacities for action. They are adept at framing moral arguments and can draw on intellectual traditions that give these arguments greater resonance in public debate. But, curiously, they often lack an understanding of how social and political change actually happens. While many ethicists see social change as their goal, few analyze the processes for social change that would enact our goals. Religious activists invite academics to learn from the grassroots ethical work of their movements and to evaluate their moral arguments and theories of moral agency against the hard realities of people’s lives and incremental work for social and political change. Sustaining relationships with religious activists can help academic ethicists better judge whether their work is resonant, or at least not at odds, with building that agency. By listening to religious activists more carefully, we all deepen our understanding of practices for social change and the concrete cultivation of moral agency.
Exploring, Evaluating, and Enhancing Economic Political Agency

Religious activists offer significant resources for building the economic political agency of the working poor and their allies. But this work also requires the continual evaluation of the use of those resources so that activists can sustain the critical edge needed to expand the agency necessary to pursue economic democracy. If a democratic polity based on economic justice is a primary goal of progressive religious activists, they need to focus their attention on how religious worldviews and practices can, and do, cultivate moral action in relation to the political economy. This evaluative process helps to provide clarity on how to continue to cultivate, renew, and expand religious resources dedicated to the moral agency of low-wage workers and their allies.

A complex constellation of activities is needed to enhance the power of those who are normally excluded from policy making. Good arguments, however important, are never enough for social change. Robust economic political agency for the working poor entails parallel work in reconciliation, leadership development, and ritual renewal in order to sustain involvement. Thus, moral agency becomes a multidimensional concept dependent on greater institutional work and continual cultural nurturance.

The living wage movement is a story about the intertwined issues of economic poverty and political poverty, issues the movement must address together. In the midst of economic and political deprivations, religious persons are building a movement not just to pass a single economic triage policy but also to reinvigorate a moral worldview that requires greater economic political power of, with, and for the poor. In many ways, their efforts parallel and illuminate the reemergence of progressive theology more generally in the last decade and its focus on putting poverty back on the national and global political agenda.

The following chapters focus on specific areas of the movement in order to enhance our understanding of the contributions and challenges that religious worldviews and practices offer for building moral action focused on the political economy. Each chapter explores a primary practice of the movement, analyzes religious contributions to this practice and its cultivation of moral agency, identifies an ethical issue around agency arising from this work, and offers a way forward from religious sources for the ongoing agential work of the movement.
Chapter 1 contextualizes the emergence of the contemporary living wage movement in the United States. By conscious political choice, U.S. politicians have opted to undermine the original intent of the minimum wage by refusing to raise it adequately over the last half-century. Despite increased worker productivity, the minimum wage is far below what is necessary for a small family to pay for their basic needs in this country. The increase in working poverty thus signals both the economic and political poverty of low-wage workers. Religious organizations join coalitions for a living wage precisely to counter these intertwined poverties. Faith-based community organizing is second in size only to the labor movement in advocacy and mobilization for social justice among low-wage workers in the United States. Moreover, the reemergence of progressive religious activism and the rebirth of religion-labor-community coalitions for living wages have been mutually reinforcing. Religious activists seek to enhance the economic political agency of low-wage workers and their allies and put poverty back on the national agenda.

Chapter 2 analyzes the ways that the moral framing of the movement and its religiously resonant arguments on the moral nature of government and wages facilitate an alternative vision of the political economy. Religious activists not only define what is unjust about working poverty but also identify culpable actors (businesses and especially government), offer an action plan (living wage ordinances), and provide the motivation to move people to action. While drawing implicitly and explicitly on long-standing religious traditions for their arguments, religious activists also carefully include pragmatic economic appeals. The social equity strand of neoclassical economics encourages governments to focus their economic corrections on lower and middle classes for greater economic growth. While this framing has great resonance with U.S. voters, activists must be careful not to embrace the neoliberal ideal of independence from government. Religious activists can better support the working poor by emphasizing the theological goods of interdependence as a foundation for a moral economy.

Chapter 3 explores the role of religious organizations in multiracial and ethnic living wage organizing, and chapter 4 analyzes the gendered nature of living wage organizing. Religious activists in the living wage movement ground much of their moral motivation and argumentation in what is perceived as God’s special concern for the poor. Economic class is certainly the focus of much religious organizing.36 In the United States, however, economic class can rarely be separated from race and gender.
Within this intersection, progressive religious organizations offer particular strengths and challenges for building movements in raced and gendered political economies. Chapter 3 explains that religious activists take on two major racialized functions within the living wage movement: bridge building and political activation. Bridge building involves the work of ideology translation, relational repair, and inclusion monitoring in coalitions. Political activation involves cultivating the resources (public speaking, personal connections, and the like) necessary to enhance political participation. Through these activities, activists augment the moral agency of low-wage workers and their allies by offering pathways for building a collective identity across difference and by providing opportunities for more marginalized persons to cultivate key civic skills. While religious organizations and activists offer these resources, they can also be the source of significant resistance to cross-race and cross-class political engagement. Even some forms of well-intentioned “grass-tops” religious organizing can ultimately undermine the economic political agency of low-wage workers. Continued meditation on the multiple dimensions of theological solidarity—preferential accountability (or responsibility to the poor), structural conscientization (developing critical analyses of social reality), complex identity recognition (or realizing we are not defined by merely one identity), and expansive moral agency (building and embracing further capacity to act for the good)—can help religious allies continually evaluate their work.

Chapter 4 also traces the contributions of feminist organizations to living wage activism and discusses their connections to religious activists. Motivated in part by the feminization of poverty, certain feminist foundations, organizations, and researchers provide important resources for the living wage movement. Moreover, women represent half of all the organizers and board members in religious organizing. This is particularly important because women are generally underrepresented in political engagement, and these women often provide crucial role models. Yet this “feminization of organizing” can be a problem when women professional religious organizers also lack the structural support (childcare, healthcare, retirement) necessary to sustain their positions. In addition, religious organizations that are close allies with feminist organizations sometimes encounter resistance from other religious entities over reproductive rights issues. In response to these challenges, this chapter reflects on the “sacrificial” demands of low-wage worker organizing and the needed supports for women organizers as
well as on the call of Christians to reach across even grave difference to “remember the poor” (Gal. 2:10).

How activists utilize religious ritual to strengthen moral commitment and moral agency within the movement is featured in chapter 5. Religious ritual gives activists a vital way to cultivate collective identity, offer low-risk participation, challenge the boundaries of sacred and profane, and display embodied testimony. Through ritual practice, activists ultimately “re-member” the sacred, or expand the places and persons included in its scope. Yet the use of religious ritual is also vulnerable to becoming a form of theater for political expediency, losing its larger meaning and legitimacy. In order for religious ritual to maintain its integrity, its power, and its meaning, religious activists must build and maintain connections with other more continuous worshipping communities (congregations, intentional communities, etc.). These connections help keep religious rituals lithe and authentic, renew the whole context of faith that makes sense of political work, and provide a longer-term vision of the liturgical nature of activism itself.

The final chapter reflects on the next stages of the living wage movement. While there are fewer municipal living wage campaigns active in 2010 than in 2005, the living wage movement is best seen as an important gateway to other worker justice struggles such as raising state and federal minimum wages, developing and enforcing anti-wage theft laws, fair treatment of undocumented workers, and negotiating community-benefit agreements. As with previous campaigns, religious activists not only seek to enact concrete policies but also build the moral agency of low-wage workers and their allies in order to alter the landscape of the political economy. Participatory justice is their ultimate goal, not just policy development. As the movement enters these new stages, we briefly reiterate the lessons and challenges the movement’s complex work has presented so far. Robust economic political agency for the working poor and their religious allies entails not only making good moral arguments (or framing), but also parallel work in bridge building, alternative political development, gendered leadership, and ritual renewal. Through these organizing practices, religious activists ask us to think and to act more thoroughly about the moral and theological meanings of wages, work, government, political engagement, and the political economy.