

# Church and Community

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# The United Church of Christ

in the Philippines

and

## Trade Unions



What should the church's relation be to the trade union movement? Since 1957, the Committee on Industrial Life and Vocations has been seeking to answer this question as it has explored the avenues open to the church in its relationship with trade unionism. It began this quest for two reasons.

The first reason derives from its recognition of the trade union movement as a vehicle for social justice. The trade union movement in its struggle to gain recognition of the rights of working people has drawn upon the same source which has motivated the church's concern for human dignity. Both the trade union movement and the church are indebted to the prophetic strain in our Judaeo-Christian heritage. Realizing this mutual heritage the church must take seriously the efforts of the trade union movement to achieve a more just economic order.

The second reason centers in the role which trade unions are playing in the socio-economic development of the nation. In an industrial economy, organized labor becomes one of the major vehicles of social change. Even though organized labor now makes up only a fraction of the total labor force, it is the segment which is most directly affected by change. Organized labor bears the imprint of the industrial process. Not only is the worker's daily life reshaped by the demands of the industrial machine, but his social relationships are restructured by the new organizations to which he belongs. The trade unions become one of the chief recipients of change as well as one of the chief agents of change in a developing society. If the church is to understand its mission in this society, then it must see itself in relation to the trade

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By **Richard P. Poethig**, program director, Committee on Industrial Life and Vocations, United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

union movement and assess the role which Christians can play in the trade unions.

### DIFFERENT STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

**W**ITHIN THIS POSTWAR PERIOD the relationship of the United Church of Christ to the trade union movement has passed through several stages. In the early stage there was within the churches a broad, undefined concern for labor. Many people recognized the need for understanding the working man, but there were few who could provide explicit expression to this need. In the 40's, two men provided the church with a clearer focus of the problems of labor.

In Mindanao a chain of events brought a former pastor into the leadership of the Mindanao Federation of Labor. Moved by the plight of the working people in Mindanao, Cipriano Malonzo took an active role in a Zamboanga labor federation. Gifted with persuasive abilities, he organized the workers on the plantations and in the lumber camps. He became more deeply involved in the labor movement, but he never forgot his responsibility to keep the church abreast of the problems of the industrial worker.

One of Cipriano Malonzo's teachers was Proculo Rodriguez of Silliman University. Professor Rodriguez was always alert to the application of the Christian faith to human social problems. He stirred up the same concern among his students. In 1948, Proculo Rodriguez was elected bishop for the Mindanao Jurisdiction in the newly formed United Church of Christ. His social concerns were soon felt in other areas of the Church. He strengthened the current of thinking which brought into being the church's program of industrial work in 1956. In 1957, the Committee on Industrial Life and Vocations launched a program of industrial evangelism. Valentin G. Montes, a layman with both legal and seminary training, was called to head up this work. Fraternal worker Richard P. Poethig was assigned as his associate. The committee, made up of laymen and pastors involved in urban-industrial work, became responsible for providing guidelines for the development of the church's ministry in urban and industrial areas.

### BEGINNING THE DIALOGUE

**T**HE IMMEDIATE TASK of the committee in relation to trade unionism was to provide pastors and laymen with a wider knowledge of the trade union movement. The committee sought to achieve this by bringing church people together with trade unionists. This has been carried out along several lines.

1) **Trade unionists as special lectures**—Wherever it is possible to include a trade unionist in a program he is invited to present the view of labor. Trade unionists have been invited to lecture to social ethics classes in Seminary or in special seminars. During the Rapid Social Change series of 1958-61 on "The Church and Economic Development" trade unionists not only appeared as lectures and panel members, but participated as discussants.

2) **Industrial Life Conferences and Seminars**—In carrying out program on a regional level, the committee includes local trade unionists, along with management people, to present labor's views of the economic problems in their area. In Conferences and Seminars in Mindanao, the Visayas, and Luzon, pastors and laity are put in touch with the trade union leaders in the area either by inviting them to speak or by visiting the trade union offices.

3) **Luncheon meetings with trade union leaders**—In Manila a dialogue on the church and labor took place between city pastors and trade union leaders. A series of luncheons was held at which trade union leaders gave papers on varying aspects of "The Church and the Labor Movement." By the end of the series the pastors showed a deepening perception of the issues involved in the church's relationship to working people.

4) **Specialized training at the Asian Labor Education Center**—For those pastors who are carrying out ministries in industrial areas, the committee has arranged for specialized training of pastors at the Asian Labor Education Center. The pastors participate as observers at Resident Labor Training Schools where they live from one to two months with trade unionists. During this time they become acquainted with the issues of economic development, trade union history and structure, collective bargaining and labor-management relations. They also gain a firsthand acquaintance with trade union leaders. These relationships provide them with the experience necessary to meet trade unionists in their own areas. Nine pastors from Mindanao, the Visayas and Luzon have engaged in this program. One of the most recent trainees, Miss Luz Bacerra, Director of Women's Work, participated in a program for women workers.

These programs have meant to deepen the church's awareness of the trade union movement. They have provided the basis for a dialogue between pastors and trade unionists. This dialogue is a continuing process which needs to be carried on among the membership within the churches. In order to achieve a broader base of involvement

there must be guidelines for teaching members the church's stand on trade unionism.

## PROVIDING GUIDELINES

AT THE 1960 GENERAL ASSEMBLY of the United Church of Christ, the assembly delegates adopted "A Statement of Social Concern." The statement was the first official expression of the church's understanding of its social responsibility. The statement included a section on the Christian's participation in the trade union movement. Let us look at the process which brought this statement into being.

In August, 1958, the Executive Committee of the United Church of Christ requested the Department of Public Welfare to begin the process of thinking through the church's responsibility for contemporary social issues. A Statement was prepared by the Committee on Industrial Life and Vocations on Philippine economic development. It was next discussed in the Department and then passed on for inter-departmental consideration. The revised statement was sent to the Annual Conferences for their action. The suggestions and the statement were brought to the floor of the Assembly. The Assembly voted the statement as an expression of the church's social concern and a guide for action in the community.

The statement focussed its attention on the problems involved in economic development. It dealt with population pressure, the need for agricultural development, modern technology and industrialization, organization and unemployment, the trade union movement and management relations. The statement ended in a call to Christian laymen to live out their obedience to Jesus Christ in all these realms of life.

"The Statement of Social Concern" clarified the church's attitude toward the trade union movement. The statement expressed its support for "encouraging a free, responsible and democratic trade union movement." It went on further to suggest that: "We see the opportunity for educating the great numbers of workers to responsible citizenship and workmanship through the trade unions. We also recognize the place of trade unions in achieving a more equitable distribution of the benefits produced by labor. We call upon our own Christian workmen to support the trade union movement and to provide the responsible participation and leadership necessary to achieving the goals of freedom and justice in society." The statement thus provided a base from which the Committee on Industrial Life and Vocations could launch out into other programs.

In clarifying the church's relationship to the trade union movement, there was need for teaching materials setting forth the Christian view

on labor. Biblical studies on work and materials on the trade unions had been published from 1958-1961, in "A Commentary on Industrial Evangelism," the Committee publication. Other articles on the place of labor in industrial development, a Christian view of the labor movement and reports by pastors on their labor education experience had appeared from 1957-1961, in the **Philippine Christian Advance**, the publication of the Philippine Federation of Christian Churches. Additional materials on the Christian view of work appeared in 1963, in a chapter on "Labor" in the book **Philippine Social Issues from A Christian Perspective**. Further material on the labor movement appeared in the March-April 1963, the January-February 1964, and the May-June 1965, issues of **Church and Community**. This present issue provides even further elaboration on the trade union movement. The task, however, is not only knowing the issues, but becoming involved. Thus the road has led from dialogue; to an expression of concern; to direct involvement.

#### INVOLVEMENT IN THE TRADE UNIONS

THE AREA FOR MOST IMMEDIATE INVOLVEMENT is the local community. The pastors who participated in the Asian Labor Education Center were the most likely to become involved at this level. After returning from their training, the pastors had a new understanding of the church's relationship to the economic life of the community. Pastors were not afraid to associate with the trade unionists in their town. They had a new appreciation of the laboring people who might be members of their churches. They also saw more clearly the complexity of the issues between management and labor. It was not one side or the other which was right. There was need to hear both sides of the issue.

The pastors showed their involvement in different ways. In one Southern Luzon community, the pastor saw the need for the labor union to have a place in the community. He counselled the leaders to rent a union hall in the town. Another pastor in the Visayas was asked by management to act as a go-between in trade union-management relations and so provide a basis for more amiable relationships. In another town, the pastor was instrumental in setting up a community forum on "The Role of the Church, Labor and Management in Economic Development." Still one other pastor lectured in a worker's education seminar sponsored by the Asian Labor Education Center in his town in Mindanao. In all cases the pastors were seeing their ministry in a new light and providing a basis for the church's involvement in the economic life of the community.

Out of this experience of training pastors to work more directly with laboring people, the conviction grew that the church should be more concrete in expressing its concern for achieving a free and responsible trade union movement. It was decided that worker's education was an area in which the church could express its ministry of service within the trade union movement. As a means of helping the laboring man know his rights under the law and gain an understanding of his responsibility for the development of the nation's economy, worker's education was a constructive avenue for the church's participation in the community. In cooperation with Cipriano Malonzo, the president of the Mindanao Federation of Labor, the committee requested the services of a person to help develop a worker's education program for the local unions of the Mindanao Federation of Labor. In 1963, Brian and Ruth Ann Aldrich, Frontier Interns of the United Presbyterian Church were called to carry out this program. The assignment of Brian Aldrich to carry out a worker's education program had a double effect. Not only was a basic education program among the rank and file members of the union carried out, but he also reached out to help pastors gain an understanding of the unions in their local communities. Both of these tasks were linked. The development of a trade union built upon a knowledge of responsibility in the economic life of the nation is necessary in building sound community. An intelligent understanding by a pastor of the goal of the trade union will help him to participate more meaningfully in achieving more just solutions to community problems.

#### THE FUTURE TASK

THE CONCERN WHICH THE COMMITTEE has shown for developing free and responsible trade unionism has opened further opportunities for it to take part in the ongoing program of trade unionism. The Director, in behalf of the committee, participated in a national symposium on "The National Purpose for Philippine Labor," providing a Protestant point of view of labor's purpose. Various members of the Committee have lectured to the labor participants at the Asian Labor Education Center. These occasions have provided opportunities for a re-thinking of the Christian faith's relationship to the issues facing a developing nation. They have shown that the Christian needs to be in the midst of the struggle going on in the world, so that his words will partake of the realities which men have to face daily. The church needs to draw upon the daily experiences faced by men in industry and in the trade unions so that its words will not come as an edict issued from on high, but as a conversation spoken among men who need words of consolation, encouragement and guidance.