

## LABOR, WORK, AND VOCATION

*A review of a century of one denomination's history.*

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**A** hundred years ago the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. entered the twentieth century on the edge of a new social frontier. Americans were being reshaped by the demands of an industrial society. The explosion of industry and its impact upon U.S. society called for a new focus for the church's ministry. Those in the churches sensitive to the human costs of industrialization saw in these costs a call to a gospel that viewed the world in the light of God's reign of social righteousness.<sup>1</sup> The social gospel movement, evangelical at its heart, was concerned for the well-being of those employed in the burgeoning industries and living in crowded city tenements.



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In a response to these changes, Charles Thompson, Secretary of the Board of Home Missions, created the Workingmen's Department in 1903 and called Charles Stelzle as its head.<sup>2</sup> It was the first such office organized by any Protestant denomination. Stelzle was a proper choice. He had grown up in the tenements of New York's lower East Side and was a machinist by trade. He was a fervent evangelist and saw as his responsibility the bridging of the gap between the church and working people. In his ten years of work at the Home Missions Board, he brought the denomination squarely into the social gospel movement and laid the foundation for a century-long ministry to working people.

The new century had brought with it high hopes for progressive changes in the social structure of the United States. The churches, reflecting this spirit, saw the need to work interdenominationally in pursuit of religious and social goals. At the formation of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908, the denominational representatives put in place social principles that were to guide its work in the succeeding years. At the Council's founding, Frank Mason North gave a speech on "The Church and Modern Industry." Charles Stelzle, a Presbyterian representative at the meeting, lifted up from that speech a paragraph outlining social principles that North thought the churches should support on behalf of "the toilers of America." This section was to become "The Social Creed of the Churches."

The concerns stated in the Social Creed, and ultimately reinforced in actions within the separate denominational assemblies, centered on human needs in an industrial society: the abolition of child labor; the regulation of the conditions under which women worked; protection from dangerous machinery and occupational disease; provisions for those injured in industrial accidents; a six-day week; ordering of hours of work compatible with physical and mental health; concern for dependent and incapable persons; and the use of conciliation and arbitration in industrial disputes. In the last hundred years through Congressional actions these concerns have been incorporated into the laws of the land.

In 1910 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., drawing upon the Social Creed, passed its first major statement on social issues. Besides the specific workplace issues stated in the Social Creed, this statement called for a recognition of the obligations of wealth in the abatement of poverty and a more equitable distribution of wealth. It also included a social statement calling for the removal of unsanitary dwellings and the relief or prevention of the congestion of populations in cities.

One of the central workplace issues, not in the original Social Creed, was the right of working people to organize in unions of their own choosing. By 1920 the Presbyterian General Assembly was ready to speak on the right of workers to organize. The 1920 statement recognized "the right of wage-earners to organize and to deal through their chosen representatives with the management of the industries in which they work." The statement went on to speak of the worker's right to a "living wage." The General Assembly interpreted "living wage" as "a wage adequate to maintain the worker and his family in health and honor, and to enable him to dispense with subsidiary earnings of his children up to the age of sixteen" (*Minutes, PCUSA, 1920, pp. 183-186*).

Eight decades later we are still in a struggle to achieve a "living wage." City councils across our nation have before them proposals guaranteeing a living wage to those who work in projects under contract with city administrations. In Knoxville, Tennessee, the City Council is dealing with a living wage proposal of \$9.50 an hour to be paid to four groups of workers: city employees; workers at city contractors; workers for companies that get financial assistance from the city; and workers at independent city agencies like the housing authority and the bus system.

It was not until the New Deal administration of the 1930s that the rights of workers to organize and to bargain collectively were guaranteed by national law. During these labor struggles the General Assembly of 1937 was critical of "the inequitable distribution of the fruits of industry . . . the concentration of control and power in the hands of a few and the temptation of this group to exploit the many for profit" and went on to advocate for the implementation of collective bargaining in labor-management contracts and a system of social security (*Minutes, PCUSA, 1937, pp. 215-220*).

The social pronouncements of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. took on structured form when in January 1945 the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations (PIIR) was organized. Its creation grew out of a major "Church and Industrial Relations" Report adopted by the 1944 General Assembly. Under the leadership of Marshal L. Scott, PIIR became a unique training program to prepare clergy for the postwar changes in labor-management relations. Their summer Ministers-in-Industry experience put seminarians on factory shop floors and opened them to the world of industrial workers and their unions. The on-the-shop-floor experience brought home the issues of the workers in the face of arbitrary demands, unsafe working conditions, and job security. More than three thousand seminarians and clergy became PIIR seminar

participants during the thirty-year period 1945 through 1975.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. expanded its belief in union protection to the struggles of migrant workers in vineyards, truck farms, and groves from California to Florida (*Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1973, p. 287; 1974, pp. 221ff; 1975, p. 155; 1976, p. 156). Support of the National Farm Worker Ministry was part of an action taken by the Presbyterian Church U.S. at its 1980 General Assembly (*Minutes*, PCUS, 1980, pp. 232-233). In that same Assembly, however, that denomination softened its original report in support of "the right of labor organizations and collective bargaining for all workers in the United States" with an amendment favoring the "right to work"—a status supported in the South.<sup>4</sup> Based on the tradition of states' rights, Southern states have passed legislation aimed at weakening trade union power. Southern states drew upon Section 14B in the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 that granted state legislatures the right to outlaw union or closed shops and to ban union security agreements in their states. Under such arrangements employers might hire nonunion labor to work at any wage, even in factories that have unions, and might hire nonunion workers during a strike. States that have passed such laws are known as right-to-work states. In the Northern and Midwestern states, where unionized industrial workers have been traditionally concentrated, state legislatures were unable to pass right-to-work legislation.

Traditional differences related to organized labor were apparent in the recent social policy discussions centered on the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy report, "God's Work in Our Hands," which came before the General Assembly in 1995. Efforts were made to weaken those provisions related to federal social programs and the support of organized labor. Attempts were made to force reconsideration of the General Assembly committee's report and replace it with a minority report.<sup>5</sup>

The "God's Work in Our Hands" report, in the long line of social policy discussions around work and vocation, examined four areas of the U.S. economy: full employment, fair employment, sustaining employment, and participatory employment. Recognizing the dramatic changes that had taken place in the workplace, the report called upon the church to reassess its view of work and vocation in the light of our high-tech society. A central question was lifted up: How do we create and find "good" work in an economy in such rapid transition?

Reflecting on a biblical understanding of vocation, the General Assembly report viewed all work, paid and unpaid, as "an integral part of the believer's response to God's call." Central to that calling, Christians of Reformed persuasion are to seek justice in their work that will "sustain and nurture the dignity of individuals, the well-being of households and families, the social cohesiveness of communities, and the integrity of the global environment" (*Minutes*, PCUSA, 1995, p. 426). The pursuit of this calling sets before us certain questions: How does my sense of vocation affect my view of my work? How do I live out that vocation on my job? What role does the congregation play in helping me fulfill my vocation in my work and in the public arena? How do those in the congregation support one another in job decisions? What avenues do we have for transforming our work structures in the light of our vocation?

These questions point to the believer's participatory role in our economy. Over the past half-century Presbyterian General Assemblies have expanded on the right of workers to organize to include the principle of employees' participation in those decisions in the workplace that determine their physical, social, and economic future. On the factory and office floor this means to seek those conditions congenial to their well-being on the job, i.e., workplace conditions and work schedules that are not hazardous to one's health. Unions have often been the chief instruments in winning better working conditions and a living wage through collective bargaining.

As unions have won rights through negotiation with management, the process of democratic participation has been expanded to include the right of employees to participate in the economic decisions that affect their future. This concept was given priority in the "God's Work in Our Hands" report:

Justice demands that social institutions guarantee all persons the opportunity to participate actively in economic decision-making that affects them. (*Minutes*, p. 426).

The report made specific policy recommendations to the U.S. President, Administration, and Congress calling for the passing of legislation that

provides a participatory role for communities and workers in the process of industrial policy-making. This role could include an inventory of community needs and resources; development of worker-owned, nonprofit, and other alternative forms of enterprises. . . . (*Minutes*, p. 440).

In an economic world that is in constant change, support for participatory democracy in U.S. workplaces pales before the overwhelming power of the transnational corporation. Mergers, buyouts, and downsizing have brought on a state of continuous job changes for many people. Mergers have also created corporate giants with tenuous loyalty to national flags. The transnational corporations' ability to move anywhere in the world determines who will work and who will not work in communities around our world. Employees are concerned that the supranational nature of corporations allow businesses to live outside the laws of any one nation with freedom to move at will with little regulation of their activities. U.S. communities, as well as communities elsewhere, have been left behind by corporations without consideration for the employees, their families, and the larger community.

With this economic scenario as background, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has called for limiting the power of transnational corporations. The 208th General Assembly (1996) report, "Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development," called upon the U.S. government

to develop international economic policies that restrain and correct the abuses of economic power by United States-based corporations and other corporations that have operations beyond the boundaries of their country of origin. The United States should stimulate renewed efforts at the United Nations to establish international codes of conduct for transnational corporations, to govern environmental protection, product safety, and labor standards (*Minutes*, 1996, p. 531).

By reason of our purchasing power as consumers, we have a role to play in pressuring corporations to follow just labor policies and sound environmental standards in the countries in which they invest. Recognizing that the search for labor and environmental justice is a global concern, "God's Work in Our Hands" called upon the denomination and its congregations

to reach out to faith communities in other countries so that together we may restrain exploitation, secure just working conditions, protect the environment, serve the economic interest of vulnerable people in our own and other countries, and press governments and industries to adopt and enforce worldwide work standards, such as those contained in declarations by the International Labor Organization (ILO) or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (*Minutes*, 1995, p. 438).<sup>6</sup>

Local congregations have responded to this call by questioning the global practices of corporations with which we do business. Sweatshop conditions under which people labor overseas, particularly children and women, has become the focus of the People of Faith Network. Based at the Lafayette Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, it carries on a campaign of information and citizen action on behalf of those working in sweatshop conditions overseas in facilities owned by or under contract with Gap Inc., Disney, Kathie Lee Gifford, and Guess? Inc. Conditions under which children and women work in overseas industries often reflect scenes similar to those that aroused the church's call for social change in industry at the start of this century. Thus, we have been brought full circle.

As we enter a new century, U.S. power on the world economic scene is unsurpassed. Our role as a source of investment capital and as a major arbiter in the loan policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund is a major determinant in the economic well-being of people in less developed nations. The movement of our investments, related as that movement is to the stability of an overseas economy, often exacerbates economic recessions in other lands (e.g., South Korea). The loan policies of the World Bank and the IMF often require "structural adjustments" in the economies of less developed nations, making them further dependent on meeting the demands of highly industrialized nations. Tragically, the negative effects of structural adjustments fall disproportionately upon women and children.


In April 1996 in Britain the Jubilee 2000 Coalition was launched. Deriving from the biblical vision of the jubilee year when all debts were canceled, the Jubilee 2000 movement is calling for the forgiving of the majority of debts owed by the world's poorest nations. The "Hope for a Global Future" report of the 1996 General Assembly, with its eye toward the jubilee year, called upon the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to:

- (1) replace current structural adjustment efforts with policies and programs that meet the needs of the poor and promote sustainable, participatory, and equitable development;
- (2) cancel or substantially reduce multilateral debts, especially of the poorest countries, and increase support for the reduction of commercial and bilateral debt;
- (3) make the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund more accountable to the people affected by their policies and projects through increased transparency, greater access to information, and greater participation in the development of projects, programs, and policies (*Minutes*, 1996, p. 541).

The Presbyterian Church's stance for justice and equity for working people and marginalized groups with which we began the past century calls us to responsible action in a growing, interdependent world economy. The future of the world economy, and the conditions of working people living in nations under the strain of debt, depend upon a readjustment in the balance of economic power. As we face this new century we have more questions than answers. We do have the experience of this past hundred years of the church's engagement with industrial society to focus our attention.

What have we learned about our struggles to "do justly" that we can take into the new century? What does our Christian understanding of vocation tell us about our role in a technological world where forms of work are ever changing and are often temporary? What does our biblical faith tell us about our responsibility to those who are left behind in this new world? From a Christian ethics perspective, what avenues and agencies are needed to assure equity in the imbalanced world of super-rich and extremely poor nations? Our calling as Christians in the twenty-first century begins with the biblical image of a society where

*like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity. (Isa. 65:22-23)*

Our task is to work toward an actuation of that vision in this next century as did those who struggled toward its fulfillment in the twentieth century. 

— Notes —

1. The social gospel preachers drew heavily from biblical imagery of human injustice and God's righteousness in the prophets and related the prophets' words to the inequities in American society. "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages" (Jer. 22:13) was applied directly to the social sins in the U.S. industrial system.
2. For the story of Charles Stelzle and his impact on Presbyterian Church program and policy, see Richard Poethig, "Charles Stelzle and the Roots of Presbyterian Industrial Mission," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, Vol. 77, No. 1, Spring 1999, pp. 29-43.
3. The story of the organization of the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations and the role of Marshal L. Scott in its program is in Richard Poethig, "Toward Worldwide Industrial Mission: The Presbyterian Story,

1945-1975," *American Presbyterians: Journal of Presbyterian History*, Vol. 73, No. 1, Spring 1995, pp. 35-47.

4. See "PCUS Softens Stand on Labor," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, June 23, 1980, Vol. 162, No. 25, pp. 1, 9ff.
5. See Chris Iosso, "God's Work in One Committee's Hands: An Attempt at 'Rule or Ruin' on a Small Scale," *Network News*, Vol. XV, No. 3, Summer 1995, pp. 16ff.
6. See also in the same report the call for "support and enforcement of worldwide work standards, such as those contained in the widely ratified conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO) or in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration includes prohibitions against child labor, and a minimum wage that supports an adequate standard of living, a safe and healthy workplace, protection of the environment, and the unrestricted right of workers to organize and bargain collectively" (*Minutes*, 1995, p. 440).

— For Reflection, Discussion, and Action —

- Richard Poethig observes that the twentieth century has been characterized by dramatic technological change deeply affecting the lives of communities and people. In what ways has the church dealt with these changes in its ministry?
- The Presbyterian Church has a reputation for a generally negative view of working people and especially organized labor. Do you agree? In what ways has this view been fulfilled in your own or your congregation's experience?
- Central to the Reformed tradition is the doctrine of vocation, which sees the faith of the believer lived out in their work life and in the public sphere. How does your sense of vocation affect your view of your work? What role does justice play in living out faith on the job? What avenues do we have for transforming our work in the light of our vocation?
- The 1995 General Assembly policy statement, "God's Work in Our Hands: Employment, Community, and Christian Vocation," provides principles for the discussion of work and vocation issues as well as action/implementation recommendations for the church and society (see Resources, page 157). In addition, the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, a coalition of forty regional religion and labor groups, publishes a newsletter, materials on religion and labor relations, and worship aids for congregations: 1020 West Bryn Mawr - 4th Floor, Chicago, IL 60660-4627; E-mail: nicwj@igc.org.