

Background to Social Creed received for study by NCCC, Nov 9, 2006

Toward a New Social Awakening: The Role for a 21st Century “Social Creed of the Churches”

The Social Creed of the Churches, endorsed in 1908 by the Federal Council of Churches, was their pledge to work together for a better, fairer and more faithful United States. One hundred years ago, the explosion of industry and its impact on US society called for a new focus of the churches’ ministry. Those in the churches sensitive to the human costs of industrialization saw in those costs a challenge to the fullness of the Gospel, which is both personal and communal in dimension. The Social Gospel movement, evangelical at its heart, inspired by Jesus’ preaching of “the kingdom of God,” was acutely aware of the brutalities of new working conditions, the social tensions of assimilating millions of immigrants and the loss of communal values in fast-growing cities.

More than 100 years ago, workers caught in the machinery of early industrialization were ground down by 12-hour shifts and seven-day workweeks. Families were broken by absent or exhausted parents. Workers with disabilities were summarily dismissed and devalued. Retired workers were left without pensions. Children worked when they should have been at school or at play. At the same time, enormous wealth was generated. That wealth, however, was distributed to a relative few, primarily the owners of industry.

Responding to this changing situation, the churches saw the need to work across denominational lines in pursuit of social change. At the formation of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908, the denominational representatives put in place social principles that were to guide the Council’s work in the succeeding years. The “social creed” was introduced by Methodist Frank Mason North, who had earlier written the great Social Gospel hymn, “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life.” From North’s report on “The Church and Modern Industry” was lifted up a section of 14 principles and policies that were unanimously put into a short statement, the Social Creed, that was repeatedly affirmed, expanded and adopted by various denominations in future years. It was to be a concise and practical summary of what a “Christ-like God” willed for those seeking “to reduce the hardships and uphold the dignity of labor.”

Through the Social Creed, the churches declared that they would stand together and work toward addressing the needs of all workers. As a result of their commitment, they were able to influence our country in profoundly good ways. The churches’ pledge of support for “the toilers of America” helped to abolish child labor and bring about worker safety, retirement security, health care, unemployment compensation, and more. In that prophetic witness, the churches’ leaders anticipated Social Security, the social protections of the New Deal and more recent health and environmental protections. For these reasons, they deserve our thanks for their brave witness and our celebration of it by making a new commitment in the 21st century. It is also highly appropriate that the National Council of Churches, successor to the Federal Council, claim this heritage.

Similar economic problems persist today: injustice in the workplace, growing social inequities, and the intolerably high percentage of people living of poverty in the United States and in other

nations. The majority of people around the world do not have access to adequate health care. Workers worldwide continue to earn low wages, fear occupational hazards and the loss of employment or other penalties when they need or use time to care for family members. These and many other problems call to the Christian conscience and to the moral imperative in every human heart.

However, in the 21st century we are also confronting complex new issues that reach beyond economics and call for unprecedented global cooperation and new governance structures. Some challenges seem greater, as the costs and consequences of war and the persistence of racism meet massive environmental degradation. Global warming threatens our very existence. We recognize more clearly divisions of wealth etched along lines of race and gender. The majority of people seem resigned to accept the present shape of our global market system and fail to see that any alternatives may exist. The responsibilities of both governments and citizens for the common good are often ignored or denied. Divisions between the rich and the poor grow wider by the day. In too many places, corruption in politics rises steadily and government competence declines. Based on enduring Christian principles, we seek to address these and other challenges in a coherent and hope-filled way.

We celebrate earlier efforts best by extending the ecumenical witness for justice in the workplace, promoting greater social equality, and reducing poverty. In hope that we too can affect change, we call upon concerned Christians to pledge their commitment to a new venture of cooperation through a Social Creed for the 21st Century. This Social Creed remains focused on economic issues but also addresses issues that fell outside the earlier reformers' line of vision. This is not a doctrinal creed; it is a shared affirmation that points to the heritage of redemptive energy and theological ethics in every faith tradition. Many elements recall the 1908 Social Creed; "the living wage," the "abolition" of child labor, "the abatement of poverty," the concern for public goods and laws, and the one-page framework that makes for maximum usability.

The proposed ecumenical Social Creed for 2008 is strongly grounded in God's promises of life in abundance for us and the whole creation and focused on the themes of globalization and sustainability. It is more explicitly theological than the 1908 statement, and reflects the Churches' learnings from Christian Realism and Liberation Theologies, and from the strong resource of ecumenical social thought. It joins a public conversation with international ecumenical declarations, several US "covenants," and the Earth Charter associated with the United Nations. It is also written in the face of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the danger of additional war in the Middle East and elsewhere. It is written to build consensus in the United States, and does not address every current issue.

Language chosen for the creed may be seen as optimistic by some, but is intended to express the gospel conviction that real freedom and power in life consist in sharing, rather than in an abundance of things. The Gospel stories witness to Jesus' prophetic challenge to the established social and economic order. Jesus of Nazareth came not to be served, but to give his life for others: his life and example still challenge us to confront injustice and preach the Good News. By supporting a Social Creed for the 21st century, the endorsing Church bodies and individual Christians would affirm that the moral vision and tradition of action identified with the Social Creed of 1908 can help guide our ministries in the decades ahead. (End)