

***Item 09-07**

[The assembly approved Item 09-07 with comment. See pp. 50, 51.]

Interim Report and Invitation to Study and Celebrate the Centennial of the “Social Creed of the Churches” of 1908

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) recommends that the 217th General Assembly (2006):

1. Receive this interim report of the Social Creed Resolution Team of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy;

2. Direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations, and the Department of Theology and Worship, as designated by the 216th General Assembly (2004), to continue work through that team on educational, liturgical, and ecumenical resources, including the updating of a social creed for the twenty-first century, especially involving church history and Christian ethics departments in colleges and seminaries related to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), coordinating efforts with those of ecumenical partners whenever feasible; and

3. Invite congregations, presbyteries, synods, and educational institutions to study the Social Creed of 1908 with resources prepared in anticipation of the appropriate observance of that influential document’s centennial at the 2008 General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the National Council of Churches of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and other communions involved.

Comment: The source of the following statement, from paragraph 3 of section title “A Positive Statement of What the Churches Stand For” be cited: “Socialism, in Marxist and non-Marxian forms, is now largely gone, but most developed nations have many more social protections and social equality than the United States, with almost a fifth of its population in poverty and without health insurance.”

Rationale

Introduction

This interim report and recommendations are in response to the following referral: *2004 Referral: Item 08-18. 2004 Referral: Item 08-18. Commissioners’ Resolution. On Celebrating the “Social Creed” of the Churches and Considering a 21st Century Social Creed, Recommendation 3. That the Office of the General Assembly, Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, and Other Appropriate Agencies of Our Denomination, Develop Recommendations for the 217th General Assembly (2006) Concerning the Possible Goals, Basic Commitments, and Effectiveness of an Updated Social Creed for the 21st Century—(Minutes, 2004, Part I, pp. 18, 627–29).*

The 216th General Assembly (2004) considered and unanimously approved by voice vote, with amendment, a commissioners’ resolution on celebrating the centennial of the “Social Creed of the Churches” adopted in 1908 at the founding of the Federal Council of Churches, and considering the preparation of a new social creed for the twenty-first century (*Minutes, 2004, Part I, pp. 18, 627–28*). A final report was envisioned for the 218th General Assembly (2008), but a proposal for broader participation and educational and liturgical resources was requested for the 217th General Assembly (2006). This is in answer to that request.

The action of the 2004 General Assembly was in three parts, consistent with the ecumenical, ethical, and educational nature of the original social creed (reprinted following this brief narrative).

1. The Office of the General Assembly was directed to consult with ecumenical partners and the National Council of Churches and other appropriate bodies to find ways to honor the role of the churches in advocating an end to child labor, a six-day week, occupational safety, retirement security, a living wage, and other concerns that “a Christ-like God” was believed to want for all Americans.

2. The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy was directed to initiate a survey of key Christian principles to guide twenty-first-century Presbyterians and others in addressing major concerns such as the lack of health insurance, the outsourcing of jobs to countries without human rights or environmental safeguards, and the impact of growing economic inequality on our democracy. It was urged, in doing this, to utilize the Presbyterian Panel, literature surveys, volunteer experts, and past General Assembly statements.

3. Both bodies were directed, in cooperation with the Office of Theology and Worship, to develop recommendations to the 217th General Assembly (2006) concerning ways to celebrate the centennial and to consider the possible goals, basic commitments, and value of an updated social creed for the twenty-first century.

The Social Creed Resolution Team

The ACSWP appointed a Social Creed Resolution Team, which first met October 11–13, 2005. Membership included the following: Gary Dorrien, Nile Harper, Carrie L. Harris, Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, Ann Rhee Menzie, Richard Poethig, Ronald Stone, Lidia Serrata-Ledesma (chair), with Eugene TeSelle as a consultant historian.

The members of the team represent a broad base of experience and insight, with several experts on church life and witness at the turn of that earlier century and others unfamiliar with what was once a very influential stance of the church (updated four times!). The team reviewed a collection of the previous social creeds and two extensive commentaries on these materials prepared by Presbyterian historians, with response from an Episcopalian deeply familiar with Presbyterian church life and broader theological developments. The relation of the “social creed” as a form of theologically grounded social witness was contrasted with the short foundational ecumenical creeds of the early church, including the Nicene and Apostles’ Creed in *The Book of Confessions*.

The Reformation Era and twentieth century confessions in *The Book of Confessions* themselves contain much ethical instruction on work and commerce drawn from Scripture: any twenty-first century update of the social creed would need to be consistent with that base and more recent General Assembly policy studies. There was clear agreement that the team should continue to ask for suggestions from the church at large, and from specific segments of it, as it does its work. In doing this it will not only publicize what it is doing and make it more persuasive; it will also gain insights that had not occurred to any of the members of the team.

The resolution team also approved a Presbyterian Panel questionnaire circulated in November of 2005, asking for the views of that balanced sample of ministers and elders on the kinds of topics considered in 1908 and in subsequent work of the church, including the 1983 study of the church’s relations with transnational corporations (by which many more Presbyterians are employed than were a century ago). The team, after both study and discussion, was convinced that it is definitely worthwhile to envision preparing a new social creed for the twenty-first century in conjunction with the celebration of its predecessor.

While this conviction was developing among Presbyterians, the United Methodist Church also determined that the centennial of the 1908 creed was worth commemorating and, through its Board of Church and Society, appointed a task force chaired by Bishop Susan Morrison to coordinate that work. Similarly, within the Justice and Compassion Unit of the National Council of Churches, a task force was put together, chaired by Dean Michael Kinnamon of Eden Theological Seminary (a Disciples of Christ minister), including members from the Coptic Orthodox, Methodist, Reformed, United Church of Christ, and (lay) Roman Catholic Churches, staffed by a National Baptist.

Acknowledging the different ways these and other communions may lay claim to the social creed tradition and formulate its relevance for today, the Presbyterian team invited the others to schedule their meetings with some overlap at a common location in March of 2006. The Methodists in particular have retained the tradition of writing a new social creed every four years, and printing the original as well with their current social witness policy statements.

The Presbyterian Heritage

The team recognized that it is not undertaking this task alone or for the first time, and that it should have a practical as well as historical dimension. While we and the other denominations can take pride in having spoken clearly on matters of great social importance years before our constructive proposals were enacted into law, the centennial is not simply to celebrate our being “right” or “ahead of our time.” The 1908 Social Creed was part of a Social Gospel creativity that continued in Christian Realist form after World War I, providing Christian vision of a fairer, more stable economy even during the “Great Depression.”

The Presbyterian church was the first denomination to set up a national-level ministry to workers and immigrants in 1903, which was praised and imitated by other denominations. That office was directed by Charles Stelzle who also developed the Labor Temple for ministry and outreach to workers. General Assemblies of the PCUSA approved adaptations of the social creed in 1910, 1914, 1920, and 1932. Then after World War II, the church both grew and spoke prophetically on justice issues, including racial equality. Marshal Scott, following a mandate from the 1944 General Assembly, established the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations (PIIR) initially at the Labor Temple and then at McCormick Theological Seminary in 1952. Directed by Scott and later by Richard Poethig, it trained a diverse body of ministers and some laypersons committed to research and action for social justice, particularly in industrial and urban areas. Scott and Henry Jones also ex-

tended this work internationally through the urban-industrial mission of the Council on Ecumenical Mission and Relations (COEMAR). The PIIR and the international dimension were then united in the Institute on the Church in Urban Industrial Society (ICUIS), linked to the World Council of Churches and also based at McCormick Seminary. This is not to minimize the sincere spiritual struggle of Christians on all sides of the social changes of the twentieth century.

General Assemblies of all three predecessor churches now reunited made many strong statements during the last century, brought together in the current Social Witness Policy Compilation. Few statements have had the impact of the original social creed, widely affirmed by presidential candidates in 1912, for example, and pre-figuring much important legislation protecting workers, persons with disabilities, and retired persons. Subsequent church witness, however, has not only influenced legislation but included the development of creative programs, such as Hunger, Peacemaking, and Self-Development of People. Newer church efforts encourage investments in ecologically safe development enterprises and purchases of “sweat-free” and “fair-trade” products.

General Assemblies (and many congregations and members) have also endorsed campaigns for economic and social justice that have been both controversial and effective: the Taco Bell boycott, protest against Talisman Oil in Sudan, corporate responsibility efforts including selective divestment from South Africa to help end apartheid, and support for Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa and several countries in Central America. The social creed concept is not a specific campaign like these, but an expression of core Christian values and goals for how we treat each other in economic and social life. The advocacy and social service efforts by this denomination and others suggest that our members appreciate both strategic and “hands-on” ways to promote justice; the updated social creed envisioned would help affirm these concerns in a concise set of clear Christian commitments.

Many self-described evangelicals in the Presbyterian church and others are equally concerned with issues of economic justice. Jim Wallis of the Sojourners Community is filling churches or auditoriums wherever he speaks. The National Association of Evangelicals adopted, on October 7, 2004, a statement entitled “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” and recently sponsored a book edited by Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers, entitled *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* (BakerBooks, 381 pp., \$24.99 paperback).

Finally, the resolution team noted that in the twenty-first century we are increasingly aware of what is being said by Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and secular movements, and are intentionally more inclusive than was the 1908 Social Creed itself. Yet, in this pluralistic and globalizing environment, the resolution team believes it is the more important to see any revised social creed as an expression of Christian conviction, reflective of Christ’s Good News to all people.

A Positive Statement of What the Churches Stand For

The Social Creed of 1908 was not perfect, and reflected the limits of our church leadership of the time. While it dealt sympathetically with the problems faced by labor, including women and children and immigrants, its perspective was white, Protestant, and middle-class. Our predecessors not only wanted to help lift up those less fortunate, but to give them Sabbath time for worship and family life, free from desperation and degradation. This spirituality was part of its effectiveness, despite its not mentioning other big issues such as lynchings in the South, the Prohibition cause, or support for women’s suffrage. Resolution team members, and all of those engaged in study and reflection across the church, need to remember A Brief Statement of Faith’s word that we “hear the voices of [those] long silenced” as we seek to address effectively the mainstream of our culture (itself increasingly diverse and less Christian) (*The Book of Confessions*, 10.4, line 70).

Allowing for—and seeking to minister to—a very changed context, the resolution team is inclined to follow the example of the 1908 Social Creed in its positive phrasing of what the churches stand “for.” The team has also seen the statements of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, meeting at Accra, Ghana, in 2004, and the World Council of Churches, affirming the “AGAPE” document at its February 2006 assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil. These are passionate statements of Christian solidarity in the face of economic globalization pressures and enormous suffering among the poor in many countries. Those affirmations illuminate our understanding of discipleship in world perspective, but they are not the relatively short statement of Christian goals and principles that is a social creed.

For the sake of those who will join in exploring what a social creed would include today, we suggest several major differences, starting with the globalization identified by our ecumenical partners. The 1908 Social Creed dealt with industrialization; much of the U.S. economy is now post-industrial, based on information and seeking maximum flexibility in trading relationships. Back then transportation advances added to the productivity of new inventions; today technological advance is still crucial, but the cyber-mobility of capital has vastly overshadowed the influence of labor. Socialism, in Marxist and non-Marxian forms, is now largely gone, but most developed nations have many more social protections and social equality than the United States, with almost one-eighth of its population in poverty and one-sixth without health insurance. Then the task of reformers was to deal with national problems and gain laws and regulations at the national level; now it is also to deal with transnational problems and seek transnational solutions.

The place of the “mainline” Protestant church has also changed, though the resolution team does not disparage either the potential impact or the concern for integrity that “our” voice still carries. We know many are discouraged about the future, torn between self-doubt and ideological denial of the suffering of others. It is certainly not possible in any one statement by one or more churches to recapture the courageous optimism of the Social Gospel movement, some of whose leaders had as much utopian hope as egalitarian outrage. United States citizens today, in comparison to citizens of most other countries, feel greater insecurity about terrorism and the economic impact of trade and budget deficits. Corruption and cronyism also seem pervasive at the top levels of corporations and government, which leads to a moral cynicism at unshared sacrifices, especially by those involved in the Iraq war. Illegal immigrants, totaling as many as twelve million, though resented by some, also bear large burdens in the low wage sector of the economy. All of these topics are complex: the challenge in a social creed is to focus on the moral issues and affirm constructive directions that reflect the hope of the Gospel.

The Social Creed of 1908 came relatively late in what is called The Progressive Era so that it built consensus on some matters that had been struggled over since the 1880s. It did not give full expression to the sense of outrage and moral demands that had given rise to the era; neither did it say all that could have been said about Jesus’ teachings and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Focused as it was, however, the social creed influenced the way Christians and others saw the world of work. Some of the churches’ stands seemed reasonable and decent and were enacted into law—in some cases after being struck down at first by a very conservative Supreme Court. Other elements in that 1908 statement still await fulfillment. Times do change, and expectations of government and corporations and individuals and churches and climates change.

A centennial offers an opportunity to reflect on the process of change, perhaps to count the blessings of some progress, and perhaps also to count the cost of new efforts. The invitation of the commissioners of this 217th General Assembly (2006), should the recommendations above be approved, is that we remember an insightful and encouraging act of witness, and that we try to offer a similar statement of conviction and hope to our time, and to our God.

The Social Creed of 1908
Federal Council of Churches
(Now, National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.)

We deem it the duty of all Christian people to concern themselves directly with certain practical industrial problems. To us it seems that the Churches must stand—

For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.

For the right of all men to the opportunity for self-maintenance, a right ever to be wisely and strongly safe-guarded against encroachments of every kind.

For the right of workers to some protection against the hardships often resulting from the swift crisis of industrial change.

For the principle of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions.

For the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational disease, injuries and mortality.

For the abolition of child labor.

For such regulation of the conditions of toil for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community.

For the suppression of the “sweating system.”

For the gradual and reasonable reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practical point, and for that degree of leisure for all which is a condition of the highest human life.

For a release from employment one day in seven.

For a living wage as a minimum in every industry, and for the highest wage that each industry can afford.

For the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised.

For suitable provision for the old age of the workers and for those incapacitated by injury.

For the abatement of poverty.

To the toilers of America and to those who by organized effort are seeking to lift the crushing burdens of the poor, and to reduce the hardships and uphold the dignity of labor, this council sends the greeting of human brotherhood and the pledge of sympathy and of help in a cause which belongs to all who follow Christ.
