

AN INVITATION for discussion groups on Economic life in Christian Perspective:

GOD and MAMMON?

CHURCH and MARKET?

GOSPEL VALUES and PROFIT NEEDS?

What social needs should the market serve?

Could you imagine a shared **SOCIAL CREED** for the churches that would summarize Christian values and basic goals?

Back in 1908, well before the New Deal, the ecumenical churches created an influential “Social Creed” that called for “the abolition of Child Labor,” an “end to the sweating system,” “a living wage,” “equal rights,” and 10 other prophetic stances. The National Council of Churches, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and a number of others are preparing to celebrate the Centennial of the original Social Creed in 2008, in part by developing a new one. And they welcome your congregation’s help.

Attached to this is a copy of that early Social Creed and a brief article from the *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine laying out some of the issues and supporting the study plan. The invitation here is straightforward. We propose a few basic questions for which we would like your own adult education or Sunday School class’s responses. But then we ask you to take a hand at drafting a Social Creed yourselves, with however many topics you feel called to address—and believe the Church should address.

Every denomination has its own resources on Christian faith in economic life and on social issues related to the economy, including employment, taxation, pensions, health care, productive investment, development, ecology and racial justice. But what are the core motivations of the Christian, and what Biblical and ethical bases do they have?

On the reverse of this paper is a brief questionnaire for a one to three session discussion. Please send your responses—whatever your communion—to:

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy,
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

100 Witherspoon St. Room 3607

Louisville, KY 40202 acswp@ctr.pcusa.org Thanks!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION ON “SOCIAL CREED” 1908 – 2008

1. What parts of scripture or specific verses have shaped your Christian conscience when it comes to economic and social relations?

2. What are the social and economic concerns that you / your discussion or study group think are most pressing today?

3. What are the risks for a congregation or denomination of speaking out on those concerns, even in general ways?

4. What are the risks of not speaking out or, in the words of the 1908 Social Creed, “standing for,” some clear values, principles and goals that address those concerns?

5. What are the specific gifts that your denominational tradition or your own congregation brings to the ecumenical community as a whole, out of events, struggles and social ministry with groups in your area or region? Other resources you would recommend?

6. Please let us know who you are and how many participated.
7. Please send us any additional reflections on these questions AND...
8. We welcome any updated social creeds you may produce!

Blessings to you in Christ, The Social Creed Resolution Team, PC(USA)

It's Time For A New Social Creed

By CHRISTIAN T. Iosso

This far into the last century, Christians in the Progressive and Social Gospel movements were beginning to put together what became, in 1908, the Social Creed of the Churches. The end of child labor, the beginning of the 8-hour day, the right to organize, occupational safety and health regulation: these and the 10 other reforms listed were not won by fledgling unions or the small Socialist Party. They were achieved as public policy in larger part because denominations debated them, congregations studied them and Christian voters accepted them in various platforms as legitimate responses to industrialization, urbanization, and waves of new immigration. The Social Creed was part of the founding platform of the Federal (now National) Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America and was a prototype for many later statements of ecumenical and denominational conscience.

Statements of ideals are not simply exercises in idealism, as some Christian Realists and neo-conservatives have argued. Walter Rauschenbusch, for example, the pre-eminent prophet of the Social Gospel, is now widely understood to have been quite clear about the tragic and immoral sides of both individuals and collectivities. His social strategies were concrete and influential, even if disrupted by the devastation of World War I. It can be argued, in fact, that wars and international crises have periodically distracted the churches from social and economic conditions at home. Certainly the distinctively Christian social witness of the mainline Protestant churches is at a low point today, as is that of the Roman Catholic Church, partly for different reasons.

The sheer growth in poverty and inequality are an argument for coordinated Christian action. Even the churches' self-interest argues for reducing inequality, since our current educated, middle-class churches depend on there being an educated middle class. The question is whether any statement of social goals and ethical principles would serve to unite and advance the witness of ecumenical churches to those outside, including the poor themselves. Yet, do

"purpose-driven" churches not benefit from statements of purpose and the planning these encourage? Even if some kinds of Christians might reject the premise that the world deserves our purposeful attention, an updated or new "creed" could be a renewing statement of purpose.

The steady drumbeat of professional church critics has been that social advocacy costs members, so it has been done on a very weakened scale, and the denominations themselves have been deliberately starved of resources. But what if excessively private piety had gutted Christian credibility and put our congregations into captivity to our "culture of narcissism?" What if the churches need the prophetic equivalent of a Howard Dean, not as savior, but as John the Baptist to identify crises at hand? And would a renewed statement of principles make it harder for any party in power to "move the goalposts" and manipulate collective memory?

There is a great need for a public moral framework beyond the world of "spin" and the dogmatism of ideology.

A new Social Creed would help clarify the difference between populist impulses and progressive strategies. There is a great need for a public moral framework beyond the world of "spin" and the dogmatism of ideology. The achievements of the New Deal are being strongly contested by political approaches that both limit tax revenues and shift them away from programs like Social Security and Medicaid/Medicare. Similarly, many governmental services are being reduced, the minimum wage stagnates well below the poverty level, one in five children are poor, and many people's "lifetime" amounts of public assistance are running out, without widespread opportunity to emerge from "dependency" and economic desperation. One in seven citizens does not have health insurance, and income disparity

grows steadily more marked.

A new social creed, developed with the input of all the ecumenical churches, could also strengthen and re-ground the ecumenical movement. The ultimate challenge would be editorial: limiting the potentially enormous scope and linking values and principles with goals and directions in particular areas. The 1908 Creed was phrased positively: "For the suppression of the 'sweating system,'" "For a release from employment one day in seven," "For a living wage as a minimum...", "For suitable provision for the old age ...," ending the 14 with, "For the abatement of poverty." The means to reach these "middle axiom" goals are left out. Some Christian content comes only at the end of the practical proposals: "... 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."

Yet the creed invoked the Social Gospel confidence in a "Christ-like God" who still willed a kingdom and not a cross for all "toilers of America." The ecumenical movement today does not reflect as clear a theological base, given the range in social ethics from liberation solidarity to character and virtue emphases, including significant racial, ethnic, gender and orientation issues. A new social creed would need to be inclusive but also universal in application; too "politically correct" a document would be dead on arrival. Jesus' own lists of "kingdom" marks would probably start with the Beatitudes; 100 years of biblical criticism may help us understand better how holistic his gospel is, and how much truer than the gospels of work and wealth, profit and power, success and self-esteem. Covenantal ethics may also help us appropriate the good out of scores of social (and anti-social!) contracts.

Are the problems of today too complex for a brief statement? Not of basic principles about who should share burdens and benefits, externalities and opportunities, regulations and protections, and about the responsibilities of government, large corporations, unions and markets. The former director of the

faith-based initiatives program and other former officials of the current administration claim that there is little internal debate on policy impacts: thus a truly church-based initiative could open up non-partisan debate. Beyond the many basic arguments over progressive taxation, roll-back of inheritance and other taxes on unearned income, outsourcing of jobs, energy and environmental impacts, gambling and crime, there is also the fact of growing corruption. The accounting scandals pre-and post-9/11, out-of-control executive

compensation practices, insider trading, widespread tax evasion, and efforts to "de-fund" virtually all regulatory agencies increase cynicism and apathy which are likely to continue, even if muted by security fears. Profiteering in war contracts seems only one facet of government by denial, secrecy and "conflict of interest."

Compared with this mismanagement and exploitation, every pastor can point to healthier lessons from congregational life and social ministry that would echo Acts 2 and 2 Corinthians 8-9. Isn't it

time for a larger representation of the church to do that, too? Public policy and social ethics are too important to be left to the politicians and pundits. And if the ecumenical churches are to have a social creed for the 21st Century, now is the time to start developing it.

CHRIS IOSSO is pastor, the Scarborough, N.Y. church

**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 safeguarded 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.