Beyond New York: Into the World

Introduction: Beginning An Urban-Industrial Ministry

My time at Union Seminary in the early '50s set me on my course in ministry. I knew that my calling was to be with working people. Living among middle class people in college and in seminary was for me a new experience. There was a difference between my first nineteen years growing up in New York City and my next seven in the world of middle class Americans. Bob Davidson, who was also from a Long Island working class family, once reminded me that we were a minority at Union Seminary. He told me that he counted only three of us from working class families during our time at Union.

The most obvious area of difference was political perspective. In college I found myself continually taking the side of working people, particularly the unions, against the business-oriented views of my peers. They looked upon my support of labor unions in their struggles with corporations as incredulous. The more I argued for workers and their unions, the more I identified with my own roots.

My years at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, which we called MAPC, had sharpened this awareness. My friends at Madison Avenue were from working class backgrounds. Most of them came from the other side of the Third Avenue "El " tracks. It was the dividing line between the tenements of Yorkville and the upper middle class brown stones and the high rises which dominated the scene west of the "El."

The Sunday congregation at MAPC were largely people from middle and upper class background. They lived on the Central Park side of Third Avenue. We lived on the East River Side. The location of the church on Madison Avenue had much to do with who came on Sunday. The church house had much to do with who came for the weekend activities.

The church house, which stood beside the church, towered over the steeple of Madison Avenue Church. It was built as a mission outreach to the families who made up the Yorkville area of the East Side. The church house held the church offices, but a disproportionate amount of space was allotted to program activities. The minister for Christian Education and those engaged with youth held major places on the church staff.

One of the few times my mother made the trip from First Avenue to Madison Avenue was on a hot Summer evening in July. It was in the middle of the Depression. I was about eight years old at the time. The church held summer programs on their roof garden - a screened in space on the top of the church house. Roof garden programs consisted of games or movies. There was a time for refreshments so parents could engage in conversation. The programs gave families from the tenements a respite from the summer heat. From the high perch of the roof garden I looked down in wonder at Central Park and the lights of the city around me.

Madison Avenue rented space from a Hungarian Baptist Church on 80th Street between Second and Third Avenue which it used for Good Will Sunday School. It was here my mother felt more at home. The social and psychological distance between First Avenue and Madison Avenue was too wide for my mother to make the journey for Sunday worship. Her major concern was my roots in a church.

After graduation from Good Will Sunday School at twelve years, I made the trip regularly from First Avenue to Madison Avenue. The church house held special attractions to young people whose only other regular alternative was the streets. The gymnasiums served as space for basketball, volleyball, badminton and for Friday night dances. Many young people from the East Side learned how to dance at the MAPC Friday night dance sessions. The swimming pool, the bowling alleys and pool tables were added attractions. When the church house was built, Henry Sloane Coffin, the minister at the time, speculated that there was a possibility that the Madison Avenue church house might overshadow the church.

The fact that this did not happen was a tribute to the attention which the church paid to developing a dedicated and well trained staff. Madison Avenue never lacked the leadership to make the Christian faith both attractive and relevant to young people. This was a key to success of MAPC. It was easy for young people to lose interest in the church. Most of my friends from Good Will never made the trip across from East 80th Street to 73rd and Madison Avenue. One friend, Harry Fisher, made the walk with me. This was an encouragement. Once we made the effort, the leadership did its best to incorporate us into the life of MAPC.

After I made the journey to MAPC for Sunday morning Church School, I stayed for the eleven o'clock service. This was a new experience. At Good Will, I had been a part of the Sunday School worship. It was novel to be in a worship service where adults were in the majority. The music had a powerful attraction for me. I soon recognized that I was hearing great sermons. George Buttrick was known as one of New York's strongest preachers. From the moment Buttrick entered the pulpit he held my attention. I began looking forward to eleven o'clock. I came away from Sunday worship with a deepening appreciation for the Christian faith.

This was crucial for me. Religion was not much discussed in our household. My mother, Henrietta, was a "religious" woman in the sense that she came from a family which had church roots. She attended and was confirmed in the Evangelical Lutheran Zion Church at 339 East 84th Street. I was baptized by Pastor William Popcke in this congregation. My father Ernest, on the other hand, came from a family in which religion had no status. His father, Alwin Richard, was a Social Democrat who had immigrated from Germany during the anti-Socialist campaign of Otto Bismarck. Like many of the Socialists of his day there was antipathy to organized religion. Urban working class people saw the church as a bulwark of the business and middle classes. They felt the church did little to win just treatment for the new industrial class. None of my grandfather's "socialism" rubbed off on his children, but his distance from organized religion meant that none of his children were baptized. It was only when my father was in his forties that my mother had him agree to be baptized. Although religion was not a topic in our family, my mother saw that I was faithful in my attendance and

participation in the programs of Good Will Sunday School. Growth in religious understanding was my own responsibility.

At MAPC I was aware that those participating in the youth programs were from working class families. On rare occasions, possibly in a Church School class, we might meet a young person from a family from the west side of the Third Avenue "El" - that is, from Lexington, Park, Madison or Fifth Avenue. I was conscious at MAPC of the two worlds of the church. The worshipping community was largely made up of middle and upper class people. The young people of the "church house", who dominated the recreational activities of the church, comprised the other world. In a sense I felt caught in the middle. I was among those young people who took part in the recreational activities. But I also looked forward to being a part of the worshipping community on Sunday morning. My close friends were those young people who had taken the same step.

It was at the College of Wooster that the question of class became a major issue for me. Wooster students were drawn largely from the towns and suburban areas of Ohio. A majority came from Presbyterian church-related families. Few students came from inner cities or from working class areas. Those who did were World War II veterans who had chosen to come to Wooster on the G.I. Bill of Rights. They were not usually Presbyterian. The apparent lack of a working class base in the Presbyterian Church pushed me into studies on the industrial classes and the church. In my history studies I paid special attention to the Reformation and the Reformed Faith's relation to the industrial revolution. I became aware of the thesis of Max Weber which suggested a correlation between the Protestant work ethic and the formation of industrial capitalism. The largely middle class base of Presbyterianism made greater sense as I explored the affinity of the merchant and professional classes to the ascetic and work-oriented nature of Calvinism.

This affinity of Presbyterianism to the business class did not put me off. I had read enough Calvin to recognize a strong prophetic stream in both his writings and his actions. Incorporated in his writings was a strong response to social inequities. He called upon Christians in whatever their occupation

or profession to be conscientious and fair in the performance of their work. He saw the necessity of establishing just practices within the public domain. Calvin had public work projects organized in the city of Geneva for refugees who had no work. He recognized the propensity of those in power to use it unjustly and called for the replacing of magistrates, or any of those in power, who placed themselves above God.

My studies in nineteenth century labor history laid the foundation for my political thinking. The practices of industrial capitalism in the late 19th century deepened the class system in the United States and gave rise to industrial unions. At the same time, the excesses of those controlling capital and the working and living conditions which resulted from that control brought into being the Social Gospel Movement. I easily identified with those within the Social Gospel Movement who had responded to the injustices wrought by the industrial factory system. It was within this history that I found my answer to the role of Protestant Christianity among the working class.

In the late 1940s my student activism provided me a practical base for my commitment to the working class and the labor movement. I had discovered my grandfather Poethig's roots in the labor movement. I learned from my Aunt Helen, my father's youngest sister, the reasons for my grandfather's emigration from Germany to New York City in the early 1880s. She told me that his leaving was largely politically motivated. When he arrived in New York, and after he married my grandmother, they settled across from the Labor Temple on East 84th Street. The Labor Temple housed many of the German unions in New York City, among them the Progressive Cigarmaker's International Union. Throughout his life he maintained his connection to his working class comrades, even after his retirement.

At Wooster among the returning veterans there were those of a more liberal orientation. The war had made a difference in their views of the world. This provided the base for organizing around the issues which developed after the war. One of these questions was whether the program of the New Deal would continue in a post-war world. A group was soon gathering regularly for late night coffee discussions in the married student's barracks

apartment of Ted Fenton, a returned veteran. Anne Austin, a senior history major brought to our discussion group Jesse Cavileer, an organizer for the Student League for Industrial Democracy. Jesse's presence was the catalyst for organizing a chapter of SLID. It was the base we needed for carrying out a regular program open to the larger student body. From a small kaffee-klatsch gathering we were now engaging a larger number of students in political discussions. After Anne Austin's graduation in 1947, I became chair of the Wooster chapter of SLID.

My leadership in the Student League for Industrial Democracy both on the Wooster Campus and nationally, put me in touch with national leadership in the labor movement. For three summers from 1946 to 1948 I worked in the welfare offices of the Dress Joint Board of the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union. The Dress Joint Board, composed of ILGWU locals 22 and 69, was located in the garment district on Seventh Avenue and 40th Street. In the mid-summer of 1948 I hitchhiked from New York City to Madison, Wisconsin to take part in a student group bound for the province of Saskatchewan in Canada. Our point of departure was the barn of Walter Uphoff, who had been the Socialist candidate for governor of Wisconsin.

Seventeen other students gathered under the leadership of Doug Kelley to visit evidences of the new social awareness in the Mid-west United States and in especially in Saskatchewan where the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, (CCF) had become the majority party in the provincial parliament. The victory of the CCF brought to power the first socialist government in North America. The person who headed the government was a former Baptist minister, Tommy Douglas. As I learned from CCF enthusiasts in Saskatchewan, the movement was born during the Depression of the 1930s out of the passions of "preachers and teachers." My experience during the summer of 1948 further confirmed my belief that the Protestant Church had a role among working people. I saw now a more expanded role in working for social and economic change within and through the political process.

My college years provided me an ideological base for involvement in a specific ministry to working class. I perceived the role of the Christian faith as

an advocate for more just structures within American society. The person who most fulfilled that role in the United States of the 1940s, from a theological perspective, was Reinhold Niebuhr. At Wooster John Hutchison, and Robert Bonthius, who were on the religion faculty, were strong supporters of Niebuhrian ethics. It was from this influence, together with the need to be near my father and sister, that I chose to attend Union Theological Seminary after graduation from Wooster in 1949.

I had studied enough Niebuhr at Wooster to recognize a person who spoke to my own condition. His ministry in Detroit during the Depression and his early socialist leanings were still influential in his thinking. He provided me the theological grounding which I needed in preparing myself for an urban-industrial ministry. The contents of that ministry were to come out of the experience of "going to work."

Marshal L. Scott, had become Dean of the newly created Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations (PIIR) in January 1945. The first location of the Institute had been at the Labor Temple on New York's lower East Side. The Labor Temple's history went back to 1910 when it was created as a program in the ministry of Charles Stelzle, then with the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church, USA. Scott was conducting a two-week PIIR seminar program for pastors and laity meant to prepare the church for its new responsibility in the rapidly rebuilding industrial sector of the U.S. economy. By 1949, Scott had recognized the need for an intensive program with seminarians which would put them in touch with the realities of the industrial system.

In the summer of 1950 eighteen seminarians gathered in Pittsburgh to take part in the first PIIR "ministers in industry" project. It was a take off on an earlier "students in industry" summer project from several years before.. That summer project never exceeded several weeks and never fully engaged the seminarians in industry. Scott saw the need for immersing seminarians in industrial life.

Those in 1950 "seminarians in industry" summer project went to work full time in industrial jobs. The seminarian was to learn the life of the worker

on the line. Second, he was to learn the attitude of workers toward religion and the church. We were cautioned that we were not to identify ourselves as seminarians. This would prejudice our relationship to our fellow workers. Preachers, particularly white preachers, have reputations for a moralistic overlay which limited any real conversation. There was also the belief that preachers might be there for proselytizing.

As we discovered there were already black preachers in the steel mill, mostly Pentecostals, who were there for the additional income. Their presence gave us an opportunity, without revealing our own identity, to see religious professionals within industrial situations.

Most of those who participated in the 1950 "seminarians in industry" project responded out of curiosity. For some of us it was a good way of earning money to pay next year's seminary bills. For all of us it was a refreshing way of leaving behind our sedentary classroom experience and entering the real world of working people. For others it was ready made for exploring alternative forms of industrial ministry. We already knew of the "worker priest" movement in France. Some adventuresome French Bishops had given approval for priests to leave behind the priestly garb, don worker's overalls and enter into factory life. The French working class had a long history of estrangement from the Roman Catholic Church. The "worker priests" were actually a carry over from the Second World War. During the Nazi occupation they took their place beside those forced to do factory labor in French factories. After the war many priests decided to continue in their occupations. Some bishops gave them their blessing as an attempt to restore the credibility of the Church among the alienated French working class.

The history of the alienation of the working class in France was not lost on us. We recognized the same alienation among American workers. We could not imagine ourselves doing the same job for the rest of our lives. That summer we worked beside men caught in those circumstances. We began to understand why our fellow workers focused on just getting through the day and looking for their pay envelope at the end of the week. We also understood why the union took on such importance. It was their only means of negotiation for higher pay, more humane working conditions

and for recognition in the face of the impersonal massive furnaces and machinery with which they worked.

Before the summer was out most of us had developed strong sympathies with the cause of the industrial worker. More of us began to see industrial ministry as a real alternative. In his evening lectures, Marshal Scott had outlined the rise of industrialism in the United States. He had presented a sympathetic view of the labor movement as it encountered an intransigent and hostile management. The unions had won a place for themselves on the industrial landscape. He pointed out that we were now participating in a new era of management-labor relations. The war years had moderated the hostility which had dominated labor-management relations during the union organizing campaigns of the 1930s. Management and labor had worked together under war labor controls to assure a steady production for the war effort. When the war ended there was the threat of strikes in the steel and automobile industry. But the urgency to retool for peacetime production paved the way for establishing alternative approaches to labor-management conflict.

Marshal reminded us that it was out of this scenario that the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations had been created. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA in 1944 had adopted a report on " The Church and Industrial Relations." The gist of the report was to call the church to take part in the post-war period as our war-oriented industries had to turn their attention toward the rebuilding of peace time United States. In the context of this transition the report called for the continuing cooperation between labor and management. It saw the church's role as fostering this cooperation. It called upon the Presbyterian Church to prepare its pastors and lay people to become acquainted with the re-industrialization issues and to take part in efforts toward labor-management cooperation.

On November 30, 1944, The Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations was created by the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church. It was established to provide a "retraining " program for pastors and seminarians to meet two needs in the post-War period: (1) the development of leadership for the rapidly dying "inner-city" churches and (2) an understanding of the

crucial role of labor union power and the emergence of labor-management relations as an important part of U.S. economic life.

For the first five years PIIR carried out a seminar program based at the Labor Temple, located on 14th and Second Avenue in New York City. The students-in-industry had been originally suggested by James Myers, the Industrial Secretary for the Federal Council of Churches. Marshal Scott, with the help of Bob Stone, Director of Student Services in the Board of National Missions, was the first to make the project a reality.

Marshal's analysis of the post-war industrial scene left me skeptical. My view from the shop floor convinced me labor-management cooperation was a tenuous relationship. There was an underlying suspicion of management among workers. The attitude of sufferance, and sometimes outright hostility, toward workers was still a reality among some management. I also felt that much industrial production was out of date. I had spent the summer working on the splice bar line. It shaped iron bars which were used to splice railroad ties together. The line on which I worked was continually breaking down. We were forced to be idle until things were put in order again. Much to my surprise the breakdowns, which gave my workmates a respite, were not appreciated. They had their own work rhythm and each work stoppage disrupted their timing. I asked the department supervisor why management did not fix the line permanently. He offered the explanation that the company considered the line a loser and wrote it off against profits.

Cooperation, I determined, was a one-sided affair. The workers wanted a line that was producing, but they had no say in the process. They accepted the fact that someday this line would close down permanently. One cannot continually lose money on a production line without it being considered expendable. The workers realized that they were expendable. This became apparent to me in a presentation we heard that summer from an executive of Carnegie-Illinois Steel on U.S. steel industry production. The executive drew a diagram to show the four elements of production, each one designated by a symbol. There was a symbol for capital, then one for iron ore, then a symbol for the worker, all of which added up to a steel ingot. The

equation struck me as highly impersonal. I was one of those symbols. I wanted to be more than a quotient in the industrial process. I was left with an uneasiness about how decisions were made in industry. I realized that labor-management cooperation was not a high priority in the executive offices.

As we came away from Pittsburgh in 1950 we knew we had been part of an innovative learning experience. PIIR had done programs with seminarians before but they had been limited to one month of seminar discussions. The combination of workplace experience and discussions added a new dimension to our understanding of the industrial process. We had been steel workers for three months. We had worked in a particular part of the production process. We had taken part in the creation of wealth. We had become acquainted with the role of the labor union in industry. We had explored what technological innovation might mean to the future of American workers. We asked ourselves: what is the church's relation to what we have been experiencing.? More important for some of us: is my ministry in this place?

Throughout the summer my thoughts kept returning to those with whom I was working. If workers were to be seen as more than replaceable parts in the industrial process, there needed to be some word from the church. That summer convinced me of my place in industrial ministry. Others had also made the decision to take the experience further. Don Mathews, a senior at Union, went on from Pittsburgh to develop an industrial ministry in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Bob Batchelder from Yale Divinity joined the Detroit Industrial Mission when it was organized in the 1955. The success of the Pittsburgh summer of 1950 established the "ministers-in-industry" program as a major project of the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations (PIIR).

PIIR was moved to the Chicago campus of Mc Cormick Theological Seminary in 1952 where it was housed for nearly three decades. The work of PIIR continued on through Fifties and Sixties and into the 1970s when its program was finally phased out. By the 1970s changes in the U.S. economy had seen the major erosion of industrial jobs. The technological change we had

discussed in the summer of 1950 had give rise to the information industry and to the domination of the computer in the economy.

During the thirty years of its existence PIIR made its mark on the life of the church. Over 3000 clergy and lay people participated in PIIR seminars and summer "ministers-in-industry " programs. The summer experience became an invaluable experience in the lives of preachers in all areas of the church's life. Workplace insights were carried into pastoral ministries, committee structures and the social studies of the Presbyterian Church. As participants from overseas took part in PIIR programs the influence of PIIR reached beyond the United States. PIIR graduates carried their experience and their commitment to develop industrial mission in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In the chapters ahead I will speak of my own engagement in this urban-industrial movement in the life of the church in the latter part of the twentieth century. This journey began in the United States and moved to the Philippines in Asia. In Asia, I saw the expansion of this ministry as it became a network of people throughout Asia and connecting to similar networks in Europe, Africa and Latin America.