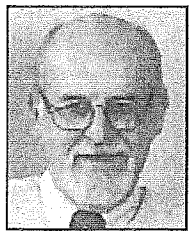
Credit: Presbyterian Historical Society

CHARLES STELZLE AND THE WORKINGMEN'S DEPARTMENT

Richard P. Poethig

Charles Stelzle was a man of his time. Though the Presbyterian Church historically had paid little attention to working people, Stelzle saw the need to change that. His early ministry had taken him from New York's East Side to the Markham Mission Chapel, a working class congregation in St. Louis, where he developed a Sunday School of 1400 people, the largest west of the Mississippi.



Like Charles Stelzle, Richard Poethig, the grandson of German immigrants, spent his early years in the tenements of New York's East Side. In his youth he attended a camp sponsored by the Labor Temple founded by Stelzle and the GoodWill Sunday School, an East Side mission of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. A graduate of Wooster College and Union Theological Seminary (NYC), he was a participant in the first summer Ministers-In-Industry Program of the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations (PIIR), then located in Pittsburgh. Following ordination as a Presbyterian minister, he did new church development work in the industrial suburbs of Buffalo-Niagara Presbytery and then served with the Urban-Industrial Mission program of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. He returned to the U.S. to become Dean of PIIR (1972-75) and Director of the Institute on the Church in Urban-Industrial Society (1972-82). He served as Co-Content Editor of this issue of C&S.

On the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the adoption of the Westminster Confession, Stelze was asked to address a meeting of Presbyterian clergy in Joplin, Missouri on the theme, "The Workingman and the Westminster Confession of Faith." Stelzle confronted the audience with the fact that most workingmen didn't *know* there was a Westminster Confession – and those who did know it existed cared little about it. The streets of Joplin, he proclaimed, were filled with working men, very few of whom attended the Presbyterian churches of the city.

Someone in the audience challenged Stelzle to conduct a service in the streets of Joplin that very night ... and Stelzle agreed.

That evening, as hundreds of miners were gathered by the music of a cornet, Stelzle stood on the seat of a carriage and gathered his thoughts. As he was about to address the crowd, his eye fell on the sign of a clothing dealer named Gottlieb. Pointing to the sign, Stelzle told his audience that "*Gottlieb*, the love of God," was to be the text of his sermon. The Jewish shopkeeper, standing in the doorway, nodded with approval.[1]

Among the crowd of miners and ministers on the streets of Joplin that night was Dr. John Dixon from the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions in New York City. As he watched Charles Stelzle interact with the crowd in the streets, he knew instinctively that Stelzle was the man for the job he and Charles Thompson, head of the Board, had in mind.

On his return to New York City, Dixon reported to Thompson that he had met a man with a vision for reaching workingmen in the United States. Charles Stelzle, he said, was a workingman's preacher. Thompson quickly issued an invitation for Stelzle to come to New York to discuss the Presbyterian Church's ministry to working people.

Thompson, a New York City pastor, was concerned about the exploding working class population that was crowding into U.S. cities at the turn of the 20th century. Everywhere he turned, Presbyterian congregations were abandoning their neighborhoods in the face of a tide of new immigrants. Stelzle impressed Thompson with his grasp of the problems of working people and his aspirations for meeting their spiritual needs. After the meeting, Thompson, with the approval of the Board of Home Missions, organized the Workingmen's Department and put Stelzle in charge.

[1] Charles Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery: The Life Story of an East Side American* (NY: George H. Doran Co., 1926), p. 67.

The creation of the Workingmen's Department in 1903 was the first such effort of any Protestant denomination. Stelzle, the first secretary of the new department, set in motion a stream of ministries that were to challenge the Presbyterian Church in its responsibility to an expanding industrial society for decades to come. In many ways, the directions for our continuing patterns of social ministry were set in those years, as this issue of *Church & Society* will try to demonstrate.

Stelze's Early Life

Stelzle came to his work as a pioneer. In 1903, few Protestant ministers had the background or experience to engage directly with working people, but Stelzle was different. Having grown up in the working class tenements of the lower East Side of New York, he went to work at the age of eight, stripping tobacco leaves in a sweatshop across the street from his family's apartment. He left school at the age of eleven to help his widowed mother as a "cutter" in a shop that made artificial flowers. When he was 15, a relative got him a job at R. Hoe, one of the city's largest printing press manufacturers. In nine years he rose to the position of machinist and was promised a supervisory position.[2]

During his teenage years, Stelzle had attended a number of East Side chapels, but he was particularly attracted to the "warm and sympathetic" environment of Hope Chapel, a Presbyterian mission led by Dr. W.J. McKittrick. It was under McKittrick's tutelage that Stelzle studied English grammar, plane geometry and mathematics three nights a week. In his hunger for knowledge, he studied Latin with a Jewish peddler, Greek with a Brooklyn lawyer, and Hebrew through an extension course. But it was his early involvement in the Presbyterian Church that led him ultimately to commit himself to the Christian ministry.

Bridging the Gap Between the Church and Labor

Under Stelzle, the Workingmen's Department[3] brought the Presbyterian Church into direct engagement with workers and their unions. Stelzle's primary advantage was that he had been a skilled machinist and carried an International Association of Machinists' (IAM) union card. In his writings and speeches he used illustrations from the workplace; this gave him an entrée into the worker's world. From the

[2] Information on the life of Charles Stelzle is drawn largely from his autobiography, *A Son of the Bowery* ... cited above.

[3] The title was changed to the Department of Church and Labor in 1906.

beginning he said that his main task was to interpret the church to working people, to interpret working people to the church, and to interpret employers and employees to each other.

In 1901, even before taking up his work at the Board of Home Missions, Stelze had conducted a survey of 200 labor leaders about their attitudes toward the church and church life. The survey reflected the critical view that labor leaders had of the churches as "rich men's clubs." Stelzle had begun his work with the view that the worker was sympathetic to the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. This was confirmed in a second survey that he sent to workers in 1903 soon after he began his national work. The survey showed that workers distinguished between the church of the early 1900s and the church of Jesus Christ. Working people, in fact, held orthodox beliefs about Christianity, but the surveys clearly showed that they were repelled by the class nature of the contemporary church.

Breaking down this barrier became Stelzle's goal. To Stelzle, pastors had a primary role in interpreting the problems of the new industrial working class to church members. The issue was not one of winning over workers who were bitter against the church, but one of reaching those who were indifferent. Stelzle felt that worker indifference was deepened by the fact that most pastors had little to say to industrial workers.

To bridge this gap, Stelzle organized workshop floor meetings as a means of bringing local pastors and workers together. By 1906, his efforts had generated over 1000 such shop meetings in six cities, reaching an audience of 200,000 working people. Stelzle also set in motion a plan for an exchange of fraternal delegates between central labor bodies and local ministerial associations. By 1910, 157 ministers were serving as fraternal delegates to trade unions in 117 cities.

The unique work being carried out by Charles Stelzle was noted with interest by Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor, the major body of organized labor in the U.S at the turn of the 20th century. In Stelzle, Gompers saw a useful spokesperson for the goals of the trade union movement. Stelzle had raised the cause of unionism to a moral level. This appealed to those trade unionists who saw the labor movement as more than a matter of monetary goals. It was, in fact, the reality of the moral commitments of laboring people in the early part of the century that provided Stelzle with his most effective base for reaching them.

Stelzle's primary means for speaking to trade unionists came through a weekly syndicated column that appeared in over 300 labor newspapers. Stelzle remembered the religious importance of his column:

> The articles which contained the most Scripture and the most frequent reference to Bible stories were always given the biggest headlines. Here again was demonstration of the fact that workingmen responded more eagerly to the religious appeal.

Ever sensitive to those in the church who were critical of his work, Stelzle pointed out that if the church had had to bear the cost of printing this material in pamphlet form and distributing it among individual workers, "it would have cost more each week than the entire annual budget of the Department."[4] Instead, the labor press provided an effective system for reaching thousands of workers with no cost to the church other than support for Stelzle's work.

In 1906, in order to win wider recognition of the importance of industrial work among church members, Stelzle introduced the concept of Labor Sunday. Pastors were asked to use the Sunday before Labor Day as an opportunity to explore the biblical theme of work as it related to the U.S. industrial system. The American Federation of Labor immediately seized upon the celebration of Labor Sunday and urged unions to work with local ministers to make the day a success. The Board of Home Missions' Report to the 1906 General Assembly proclaimed that more workingmen had attended church that day than on any previous Sunday and that many pastors had written to say that the men were still attending.

The high point of Stelzle's ability to attract workingmen to a church sponsored function occurred at the 1908 General Assembly meeting in Kansas City. Stelzle's presence attracted 15,000 workingmen to a mass meeting at the Coliseum, at which he spoke on the theme of "A Square Deal ... for the boss, for the workingman, for the Church and for Jesus."

Ministry to Immigrant Neighborhoods

Stelzle's effectiveness, however, went far beyond developing programs to reach working people. Coming from German immigrant

[4] Stelze, p. 89ff.

parentage, he had a special concern for new immigrants. In 1908, recognizing the strong link between "working people" and the streams of immigrants filling the cities of the northeastern United States, the Board of Home Missions asked Stelzle to assume direction of the newly created Department of Immigration. Stelzle later wrote that the work was given to him because "practically all immigrants were working men and ... for the most part the immigrant was a city 'problem' and practically all of my activities were centered in the city."[5]

In pursuit of this new work, Stelzle immediately conducted four one-day conferences among specific immigrant groups in New York - Hungarians, Italians, Ruthenians and Jews. Out of these conferences he prepared sociological surveys of the religious and social conditions of immigrant peoples on Manhattan Island. So thorough were Stelzle's charts and statistics that the New York State Commission for the Study of the Immigrant Problem, as well as the Russell Sage Foundation and the Young Women's Christian Association, used them for developing their own programs. In 1909, in following up on Stelzle's work, the General Assembly asked the Departments of Church and Labor and Immigration "in so far as may be practicable, upon application of any local church, Presbytery or Synod, (to) study such problems in the locality to which the application relates, outline plans for local work, and aid in making such work efficient."[6] Thus began the art of consultation and strategic planning in the Presbyterian Church.

Stelzle's social analysis had documented the continual flight of downtown congregations from the neighborhoods into which the immigrant working class had been moving. Charles Thompson, having been called from his position as minister of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church to head the Board of Home Missions, knew this situation first hand. Thompson had held the line and refused to allow the Madison Avenue congregation to move to a new location. Instead, he called for the development of church programs to meet the needs of the church's new immigrant neighbors. Stelzle also believed it was the churches' responsibility to continue to minister in these areas and to develop ways to serve the new inhabitants' social needs.

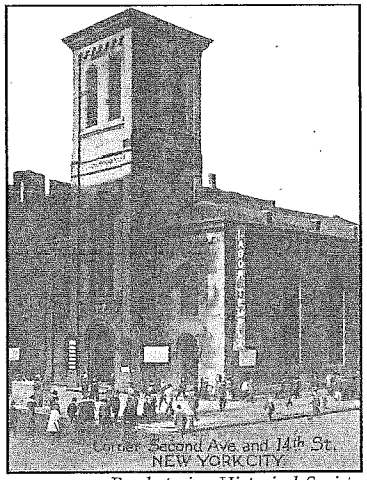
The Labor Temple

The ideal opportunity arose in 1910. The facilities of the Second Presbyterian Church at 14th Street and Second Avenue, a church that

[5] Ibid., p. 147.

[6] *GA Minutes*, Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1909, pp. 60-61.

had been abandoned by its congregation, were not being used. Stelzle saw the site as the ideal point from which to carry out a major social program in the largely immigrant lower East Side neighborhood of 400,000 people. Labor historian George Nash described the neighborhood of Second Presbyterian Church in this way:



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> In 1910 this section of New York City was the most forbidding ground for Protestantism in the United States. The "new immigration" - predominantly Jewish and Roman Catholic - had virtually overwhelmed the city missions and churches, many of which had simply retreated to more congenial neighborhoods. "Monk" Eastman the gangster, rebellious Wobblies, and Leon Trotsky were active in the area. Even Dwight L. Moody, who had once conducted a month long revival at the Presbyterian Church on Fourteenth Street and Second Avenue, had been unable to surmount the indifference of the masses.[7]

But this was Stelzle's old neighborhood, and he presented the Church Extension Committee of New York Presbytery with a proposal: purchase the Second Church building and allow him to develop a program for the people of the neighborhood. The Church Extension Committee agreed, with the stipulation that the program would be experimental for a two-year period.

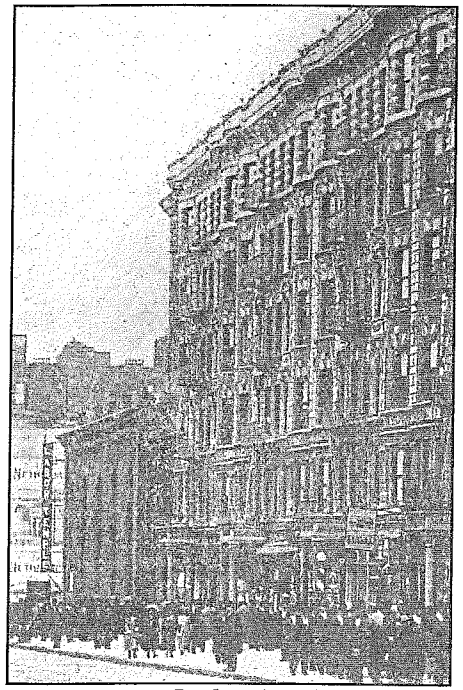
Stelzle was jubilant. He later wrote:

> I was about to realize a dream which I had since my machinist days - of organizing and conducting a church such as I felt would appeal to the average workingman. It was to be a real workingman's church in every particular. Avowedly it was to be run by workingmen, the men who actually lived in the community. So I called it the "Labor Temple."[8]

[7] George Nash III, "Charles Stelzle: Apostle to Labor," *Labor History*, II:2, Spring 1970.

[8] James Armstrong, *The Labor Temple, 1910 – 1957: A Social Gospel in Action in the Presbyterian Church* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1974).

Labor Temple soon developed a worldwide reputation as a unique experiment in ministry among working people, most of them from immigrant backgrounds. It was not long before the auditorium of the former Second Presbyterian Church was filled with the people who lived in the four- and five-story tenements of the neighborhood.



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The highlight of Labor Temple's programs was the open forum. Stelzle's reputation provided him access to a wide range of speakers, and he invited everyone – socialists, radicals of all stripes, labor leaders, and social gospel preachers – to address the crowds. On Sundays, the program went from 2:30 in the afternoon to 10:00 at night. It included a children's hour, Bible class, organ recital, reading of a literary masterpiece, concert or lecture, and sermon. In 1910, a denominational journal reported:

> After the meetings the superintendent and the pastor are surrounded by working men, young and old, some seeking advice and other proferring it on the affairs of the Temple. One and all receive the same kindly attention, but these are the pillars of the Labor Temple. They are made to feel that the responsibility for the success or failure rests upon them alone. In the near future will be formed a Brotherhood of the men which will largely direct its affairs."[9]

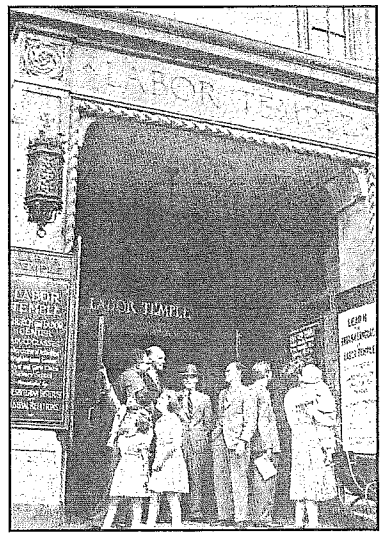
The experimental program at Labor Temple extended beyond Stelzle's initial leadership and continued its work in the lower East Side for over forty years. It stood alongside the many other neighborhood houses and community centers that the Presbyterian Church developed

[9] George J. Anderson, "The Church of the Heavy Laden," *The Congregationalist and the Christian World*, 4, June 1910, 772ff.

during the years of immigrant growth in urban centers.[10] As immigration subsided during and after World War I, the programs of the neighborhood houses responded to the social and economic problems of the ethnic and racial groups that made up the community. As neighborhoods changed so did the programs serving the residents.

The Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations

The life of Labor Temple continued into the fifth decade of the 20th century. After World War II, it was apparent that dramatic changes would be occurring in the U.S. economy. As the war was ending, Jacob A. Long, Secretary for City and Industrial Work of the Board of National Missions, called for a program to prepare pastors and laity for possible management/labor conflicts. The proper location for such a program, Long suggested, was Labor Temple. Thus in January 1945, the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations (PIIR) began its work at the Labor Temple under the leadership of Marshal L. Scott.



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As Dean of the PIIR program, Scott initiated a model of immersion in the city and in industry. Over the thirty years of the program's existence, PIIR was the means by which more than three thousand seminarians, pastors and lay leaders came into direct contact with the growing complexity of the industrial economy and its impact in the U.S. and the world. In 1952, the program moved to the McCormick Seminary campus in Chicago. There it became even more directly involved in shaping the choices of seminarians in their ministries. As participants in the program, they worked in industry and were directly involved in working class neighborhoods. Through these experiences, increasing

[10] Many such programs were directly involved in communities with major industries: Gary Neighborhood House served the immigrants working in the steel industry of northwest Indiana; Dodge Community Center was in the midst of the growing automobile industry in Detroit. For further on the Neighborhood House movement, see the article by Esther Nieves on the Erie Neighborhood House of Chicago elsewhere in this issue of C&S.

numbers of seminarians were drawn into inner city ministries as well as industrial mission programs in the U.S. and throughout the world.

Over the years, PIIR's involvement with scores of international clergy and seminarians led the World Council of Churches to invite PIIR to provide the foundation for the Institute on the Church in Urban-Industrial Society (ICUIS), a documentation and information-sharing program they envisioned to connect the urban-industrial mission practitioners of the worldwide church.[11]

The Social Creed

At the beginning of the 20th century, like many others in the social gospel movement, Stelzle was aware of the larger forces at work in the economy. He recognized the impact that industry was having on the lives of families and the conditions under which men, women and children worked. He himself had experienced these conditions. He also knew that change would require cooperation. Looking beyond the exclusivity of denominationally focused work, Stelzle was one of the Presbyterian representatives at the founding meeting of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908.

At that meeting, Dr. Frank Mason North, a Methodist, gave a major speech entitled "The Church and Modern Industry." In one particular paragraph, North called for the churches' support of social principles on behalf of "the toilers of America." North asked Stelzle to give the supporting statement on behalf of the principles. It was the only supporting statement given. Following Stelzle's speech, the resolution on behalf of the principles was unanimously adopted by the Council. Later, a statement of social principles, which Stelzle lifted from North's speech, became "The Social Creed of the Churches."

The "Creed" centered on the rights and the conditions of working people in an industrial society. It was to become the first among many such social statements adopted by church bodies. In its initial form, the Creed focused directly on practical industrial problems:

- the need for workers to be protected "against the hardships often resulting from the swift crises of industrial change";
- the need for conciliation and arbitration in times of industrial conflict;

[11] In 1967, Scott invited Bobbi Wells to become the Documentation Director of ICUIS. Richard Poethig was named Director of the program in 1972 following service in the Philippines.

- the protection of workers from dangerous machinery, occupational disease, injuries and mortality;
- the abolition of child labor;
- "such regulation of the conditions of toil of women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community";
- the suppression of the "sweating system";
- the "gradual and reasonable reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practicable point and for that degree of leisure for all which is a condition of the highest human life";
- relief from the seven day work week;
- a living wage (defined as "a minimum in every industry" and "the highest wage that each industry can afford");
- "the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised";
- "suitable provision" for elderly and disabled workers; and
- the "abatement of poverty".

The Bethlehem Steel Strike

In 1910, with the Social Creed as background, the Commission on the Church and Social Service of the Federal Council of Churches investigated a steel strike at Bethlehem Steel, where the strikers were protesting Sunday work.

The Council appointed Stelzle to chair the investigating committee, which produced a 21 page report, the first such study of an industrial conflict by a church-related organization. The issue of Sunday work, however, pointed to a larger problem in the steel industry: that of long hours and low wages. More than half of the Bethlehem workers worked twelve-hour shifts and 61% of them received less than eighteen cents an hour. A considerable number, the committee discovered, received only twelve and a half cents an hour – twelve hours a day, seven days a week. In reviewing the larger issues in the Bethlehem strike, Stelzle saw that the strike:

> ...Not only raised issues which concerned the nine thousand men employed in the steel works, but brought to the attention of the American public certain industrial problems which could not be settled by capital and labor alone.[12]

[12] Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery*, p. 161. See also, Richard Poethig, "Charles Stelzle and the Roots of Presbyterian Industrial Mission," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 77:1, Spring 1999.

"... Therefore, be it resolved..."

In 1910, the Presbyterian General Assembly issued its first social pronouncement, which was essentially drawn from "The Social Creed of the Churches." The social statements passed by subsequent General Assemblies became a primary means for calling the church's attention to the major social issues confronting the United States. The social thinking embodied in these statements became especially important during the Depression years, when they provided the basis for study documents and publications of the Social Education and Action Committee of the Board of Christian Education. These study documents were used in the educational programs of local congregations and became the means for encouraging action by local congregations and presbyteries. *Social Progress*, a monthly publication of the Social Education and Action Committee, provided regular information and exposition on current issues for the education of church members.[13]

Summary

In 1903, the Workingmen's Department was a symbol of the awakening commitment of the Presbyterian Church to ministries of social justice. As the stream moved on from this early action, the following decades saw the development of new expressions of social ministry. Each new generation found encouragement in the stories of those who had responded to the social inequities of their own time.

As Presbyterians have moved through this century since 1903, the witness of these early social justice pioneers has become incorporated directly into the heart of our church's life and witness. *The Directory of Worship* tells us that doing justice calls for:

a. dealing honestly in personal and public business,
b. exercising power for the common good,
c. supporting people who seek the dignity, freedom and respect they have been denied,
d. working for fair laws and just administration of the law....
e. seeking to overcome the disparity between rich and poor,
f. bearing witness against political oppression and exploitation,

[13] From 1970 onward, its successor, *Church & Society*, became the major instrument for promoting dialogue and involvement in the changing social issues of the day.

g. redressing wrongs against individuals, groups, and peoples in the church, in the nation, and in the whole world.

(*Book of Order*, W-7.4002)

As Labor Temple responded to the struggles of immigrant peoples on the lower East Side of New York, so the church has continued to respond to issues of degradation in inner-city neighborhoods, unequal treatment of minorities in housing, jobs and education, struggles to achieve equality for women in the economy, working and living conditions of migrant workers in the vineyards and truck farms of rural America, and hazardous conditions facing *maquiladora* workers on the Texas/Mexico border. The line stretches back to the initial response of the church in 1903 and moves forward as we continue to engage inequity in our society in its new manifestations.

The articles that follow will trace the seeds of social witness from Charles Stelzle to the present day.