

The United Church Reaches Out

How does the church confront the nation's social crisis caused by strikes, depressions, recessions, unemployment, bankruptcies, poverty and greed? How can the church aid the poor and overcome injustice and corruption in Third World countries?

For years the church at large withdrew itself into spiritual isolation and failed to be the salt of the earth. The soul was more important than the body. In reaction the so-called "social gospels" appealed for the social application of the Gospel.

Social Gospel

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), whose commitment to social Christianity gained him the title "Father of the Social Gospel in America," wrote, "When I saw how men toiled all their life long, hard toilsome lives, and at the end had almost nothing to show for it; how strong men begged for work and could not get it in hard times, how little children died ... Oh the children's funerals! They gripped my heart."

The church has a message for the poor. But just to talk to the poor is not good enough. Something corrective and tangible should also be done for all the needy and oppressed in the name of Jesus Christ, the Saviour. Unfortunately the social gospels became deed and this-world-only oriented. Missions became a ministry of social development. No longer was the church trying "to rescue the perishing."

For the social gospel the business of missions and evangelism is to encourage a greater concern for those outside of the Church, a concern that cannot cease until the abundant life for which the Church professes to strive shall be the portion of all. A UC social gospel writer wrote in 1938, "Canada will not be a worthy land unless, while we strive for purity of life here, and for national contentment through just and brotherly relationships, our eyes also are upon the ends of the earth, and our endeavour to make the whole world Christian."

Peace Movement

As a social activist church the UC is also a strong component of the peace movement. In 1959 the UC's Board of Evangelism and Social Issues urged that Canada set an example to the world by disarming immediately and use the money thus saved to help develop a United Nations police force, to promote peaceful use of nuclear energy, to assist underdeveloped countries, and to improve education and social programs in Canada.

Church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette remarked that "such pronouncements were said to have no wide influence." He was right. The arms race is still on. More money than ever is spent on weapons. Governments are obviously not listening to briefs presented by church committees or resolutions drawn up by ecclesiastical assemblies.

Since peace efforts have not made any tangible progress, a call has gone forth for civil disobedience. In 1983 the London Conference asked the federal government to establish a peace tax fund as an alternative for conscientious objectors to the arms race, by withdrawing a percentage of their income tax. A resolution from the Conference's Church in Society Committee said, "there are times when Christians, in all humility, do feel compelled to engage in acts of civil disobedience against a civil authority, rather than commit an offence against the dictates of Christian conscience."

Taskforces

The UC has also a strong involvement with the task forces: Ten Days for World Development, Task Force on Churches and Corporate Responsibility, Project North, Interchurch Committee on Human Rights in Latin America, Project Ploughshares and GATT-Fly. These coalitions were described by the 1980 General Council as "a manifestation of the ecumenical movement." They received \$190,000 annually and the equivalent of 200 days of national staff time from the Division of Mission in Canada.

Various speakers at the General Council stressed that the coalitions and their work were part of the church and should not be "misinterpreted as a small group of activists who are working on their own outside the mainline Christian denominations." The Rev. Pierre Goldberg of Montreal, in support of the task forces, argued that Christians have no choice but to side with the poor. Goldberger said that this coalition ministry is "a test of United Church doctrine worship and spirituality."

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