

Cameron Hall, Economic Life, and the Ministry of the Laity

Richard P. Poethig, Interviewer

IN REVIEWING THE RELATION OF THE Presbyterian Church to the industrial stream in the United States in the mid-1900s, the figure of Cameron Parker Hall plays a major role. Cameron Hall had early ministries in New York City's Bowery and in Hell's Kitchen during the Depression era. From his work as a student chaplain in Madison, Wisconsin, he was called in 1939 to head the Division of Social Education and Action of the Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A. After World War II, in 1946, he became head of the Division of Industrial Relations of the Federal Council of Churches. At the creation of the National Council of Churches in 1950 he was called to lead the newly organized Department of Church and Economic Life. It was in this capacity that he made major contributions to two areas of the churches' life: the relation of the church to economic policy questions; and the development of the ministry of the laity movement.

In 1944, under the leadership of Cameron Hall, an Advisory Committee of the Division of Social Education and Action brought before the 156th General Assembly the report "The Church and Industrial Relations." The General

Assembly approved the report for study and action among the churches. It was on the basis of the report that the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations was created in 1945. It is appropriate that on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1944 report, the 206th General Assembly will consider for action a policy paper on "God's Work in Our Hands: Issues of Vocation and the Problems of Work in the United States." In a real sense the spirit and concerns of Cameron Hall live on in this current policy paper. The following interview was held in Garden City, Long Island in the summer of 1982.

Early Ministry of Cameron Hall

RP: Cameron, let's begin by recalling some of your early history. How did you first become related to the church's ministry in industrial society?

CH: Even before I went to seminary, I was interested in the working man and his conditions. It was a vision I inherited from my father¹, who had a lay ministry with workingmen on the East Side of New York. When I came to my early ministry, I took a church related to the New York City Mission Society off the Bowery. I served the Broom Street Tab-

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ernacle for a year and a half. The church was directly opposite the city police headquarters. The area was largely Italian. I didn't speak Italian so I worked in English with the young people.

RP: What years were those?

CH: That was about 1924 or 1925. I had done one year of theological training at Edinburgh, a second year at Oxford, and returned for a third year at Union Seminary in New York. I had all the credits I needed, but I took two courses at Union which bored me; one on the Church Fathers and the other on comparative religion. As a matter of record, I never did get a bachelor of divinity. Instead I quit seminary and worked for a year and a half at the Broom Street Tabernacle. I went where the action was.

Then Ted Savage², Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of New York, invited me to become pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church on West 36th Street in Hell's Kitchen. I can still see myself at lunch with Ted. "Ted, I don't have the kind of experience for Christ Presbyterian." "That's why we're asking you," he said, "You don't have anything to unlearn." The presbytery ordained me in 1925.

RP: Tell us something about the church.

CH: I got to be pastor of this strong church—strong because Brick Presbyterian Church gave four-fifths of the budget. We were a regular congregation of the presbytery. In addition we were a neighborhood house. All my people were low income. During my ten years there, only four of my young people went to college. None went beyond the sophomore year. They couldn't afford it.

The congregation was in the garment district. We had a concept of ministry which was acceptable to the supervisory committee from Brick Church. Instead of saying, "This is the ministry of the church, therefore we ought to do this and that in Hell's Kitchen," we said, "We ought to do this." You get the dis-

tinction? Very profound.

Near us in Hell's Kitchen was a section of buildings which were women's wear factories or lofts. I said, "Here they are. Is there anything we can do about them?" One day we were visited by an International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) representative. The workers in the factories were going on strike. Half of the workers were with the ILGWU and the other half were not. The workers' representative came and asked if they could use the church's facilities. We had a big barn-like auditorium. I brought the matter up with my Brick Church supervisory committee. They said yes. So twice during those years we were the headquarters for strikes of the ILGWU.

About a year later, a communist union faction asked to use our facilities. You may remember that the women's wear industry had this communist faction which was fighting the ILGWU. We were caught right in the middle. I took the matter to the Brick Church supervisory committee. I told them, "In principle, we are not taking sides. We are offering a service to the workers." The supervisory committee agreed to let the communist union use the facilities.

I admired the Brick Church committee. They saw the basic principle. Just as we were not taking sides with the labor union against the employers, we were not taking sides with the communists as against the ILGWU. I want to say, that the communist group honored everything that could have been asked of them. They were orderly. They were responsible in the care of the building.

RP: The Brick Church is one of the presbytery's wealthier congregations. It is interesting that they were willing to go ahead with those union meetings, particularly since one was a communist faction.

CH: Yes, that was amazing. I think it affected my thinking on into the future. It was a great group of lay people, those

members of the Brick Church. My chairman, of blessed memory, Oliver Reynolds, was a Wall Street lawyer. I never had a clash of opinion. To put it straight, I did everything I wanted to do. But I always consulted them. They were a rather select group from the Brick Church. I'm not sure what might have happened if the whole Brick Church knew what was going on at Christ Church. We didn't hide it, but nobody asked us.

We had a full-time nurse on our staff. There were twelve staff members. We opened a clinic of Planned Parenthood. This was a pioneering act in the early 1930s. We were in a ninety-five percent Roman Catholic neighborhood. We served both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Twice a week a doctor came to counsel women from the neighborhood. Maybe this is legendary, but one person told me that an Italian woman from the neighborhood said, "By golly, I'm not going to let an Italian bachelor tell me how many children I should have."

Involvement in Social Education and Action

RP: When did you get into the social education and action structure?

CH: During my time at Christ Church, I was chairman of the Committee on Christian Education of the Presbytery of New York. I was also—and this is more significant—chairman of the Committee on Social Education and Action of the Synod of New York. Phillips Elliott³ and Roswell Barnes⁴ were also on the committee.⁵ We did some things people didn't like. We held a conference on the church and labor in upstate New York at Auburn. One of the speakers we invited was a communist. He was part of a panel. It was a balanced panel. We were not irresponsible, but I think if you don't push, you don't know whether someone is going to say yes or no. If you don't push, maybe they might say yes.

RP: This was in the 1930s?

CH: The early 1930s. We invited Norman Thomas⁶ as a speaker to another program. You know he had been a Presbyterian minister, a graduate of Princeton Seminary, I think. He was the perennial Socialist candidate for President. He was strong in those days. Many of us drew our inspiration from him. Norman Thomas and Henry Sloane Coffin⁷—in some ways they were the same kind of people, but from different points of view.

RP: What was your next move?

CH: When I had been at Christ Church eight years I began to feel I had made my contribution. I got a call to become student pastor of the Presbyterian student church in Madison, Wisconsin. This was the only church among Protestant denominations that was a wholly student church. We had our own session. One of our members went as a commissioner to the General Assembly. I worked out a scheme with my good friend Ed Kennedy⁸ over at the First Presbyterian Church that any student would be free to go to either one of our churches, but there would be no student program at First Church.

RP: Did you carry out your social education and action concerns in Madison?

CH: You know, I went to Wisconsin feeling that if I could do progressive things in New York, I could do them in Madison. After all Wisconsin was a La Follette state.⁹ It had a reputation of being "progressive."

RP: What happened?

CH: I discovered one thing. Among the Republicans there was a group called "the Stalwarts." They were heavily Presbyterians. Within the first three months of my ministry Norman Thomas came to Madison. I was invited to be a member of the sponsoring committee. I said, "If I can do that in New York, why not in a La Follette state?" That hurt me with some people. They never got over that I sponsored "a socialist." It taught me a lesson. In a new ministry, take six to nine months

for people to get to know you and trust you as an individual.

RP: Your next move was to the national church, is that right?

CH: Yes. In 1939, I was invited to work for the Board of Christian Education in Philadelphia. The former Stated Clerk of the church, Lewis Mudge,¹⁰ was acting general secretary of the Board of Christian Education. He invited me to Buffalo where he was speaking for the board and made me a job offer. I resigned from my post in Madison in the spring, to give them a chance to find somebody for the fall.

The board had to act on my call. I was without a job for two to three months. The board met and Mudge phoned me. There was a little unhappiness in his voice. "Cameron," he said, "they elected you unanimously, but Colonel Babcock, a retired army officer, who was vice-chairman of the board, would not vote. He said, 'I don't know Cameron Hall; I have nothing against him and I have nothing for him, but I'm not in a position to vote.'"

The board decided that I should be invited to preach so the colonel could come and listen and decide. If he said yes then I would be elected. If he said no, that was it. I went to a church in New Jersey. Mudge led in worship and I preached. After the service I went to the robing room. Mudge said, "Cameron, can you come on Wednesday?" I said, "What's the story?" Babcock had made an arrangement with Mudge that after the sermon, if his thumb went up, I was accepted. Mudge had seen the thumb go up, so I was in.

RP: This was your real beginning in social education and action.

CH: Yes. It was a great challenge to go to Philadelphia. The Social Education and Action department was just moving out of the emphasis on alcoholism and gambling. We weren't throwing it over, but we were moving away from those as our main issues. For years the

major articles in *The Amethyst*, which was the publication of the department in the 1920s, had a steady run of articles on temperance. It had been renamed *Social Progress*, but we still had the traditional emphasis. This became a vehicle for the issues we wanted to bring to the people in the pews attention. So I tried to move the magazine, not by dropping those issues, but by including articles on economic issues and international relations.

RP: What was the response?

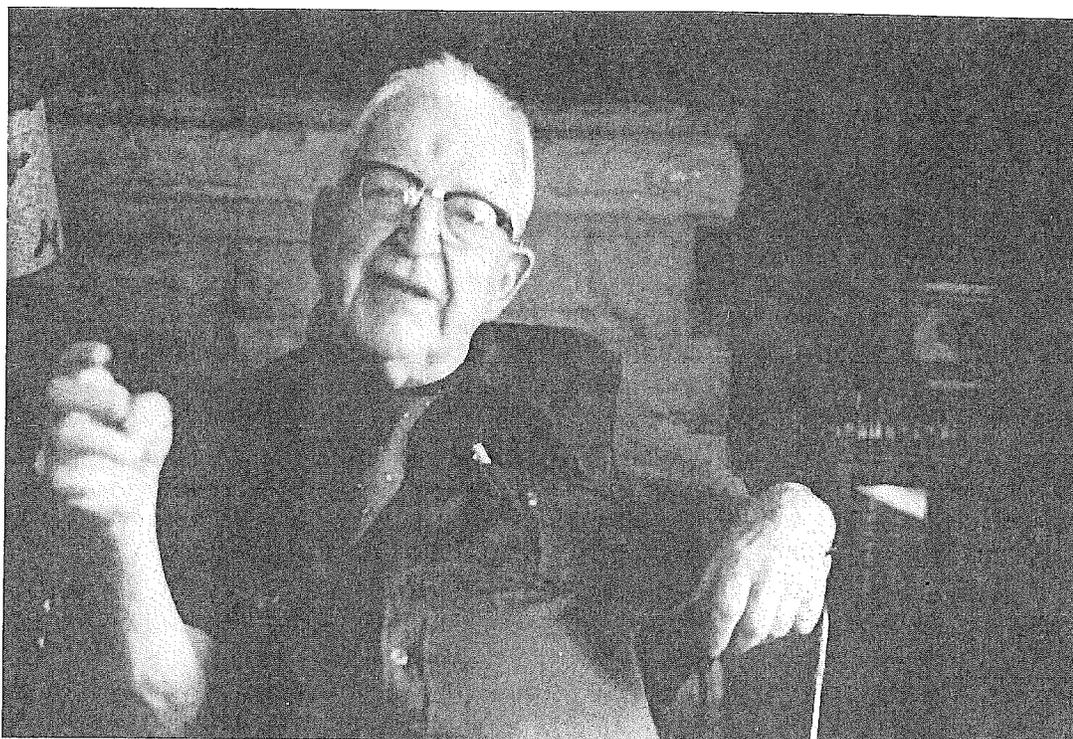
CH: Fortunately, I found myself with another congenial committee. Again I found—and this is anybody's wisdom—that if you let somebody talk in a committee so they have their say, when it comes time to vote, they'll vote with you. But if they feel there's a hidden agenda, then there is trouble. We had a chairman named McAfee who was a fine, open person. He allowed everyone to speak, so we really had no clash.

Developing the Economic Life Agenda

RP: How did industrial relations come into the picture?

CH: I had been serving on the Federal Council of Churches' Division on Industrial Relations under Jim Myers.¹¹ Jim had known me when I was at Christ Presbyterian Church. Christ Church, in a sense, was the Labor Temple¹² of the West Side. This is claiming more for Christ Church than it warrants, because the Labor Temple was wholly industrial relations, but among churches on the West Side we had developed relations to labor.

Jim had asked me to be part of a series of meetings at which a number of Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews were working on a statement on religion and industrial relations. During the discussions I was conscious of our Roman Catholic friends who would get up and say: "Pope so-and-so said this...." When a Protestant spoke he would say, "It seems to me...." or "The way I see it...."



Cameron Hall, photographed at his home in Garden City, N.Y., July 1982

That didn't seem to me to be the same. I didn't have any idea that nobody could ever speak for Protestants. But I did think that somebody might speak to Protestants from a wider base than what you think or what I think. That became for me a very strong feeling. I tried to get Jim Myers, who was then in failing health, to have the Federal Council do this on a broader ecumenical basis. It didn't appeal to him and I understood why.

So I thought, "Well, if I can't have the whole loaf, at least I can have a piece of it. Why don't we Presbyterians be a voice?" There was no other voice among Protestants developing a considered statement on what the church ought to be doing in the field of industrial relations. I had my Department of Social Education and Action vote on this. We did not want to suggest that the General Assembly set up a committee. That would take it out from our control. You just couldn't trust the General Assembly on that subject. So we suggested to the General Assembly that they "authorize"

the Department of Social Education and Action to set up a special committee to report to it and through it to the General Assembly. So we set up a committee on which there was to be three people from labor, three from employers, three from the clergy, and three from the public.

We worked on organizing that committee for two years. Frankly—and I think this is true—nobody in the church has ever gone about getting a committee of predominantly lay people. I had a strong conviction that the church has a resource of lay people with a wide range of experience and training which it seldom taps into for insights. So often I have heard the comment, "What business is it of the church to speak on collective bargaining, or about wages?" I say, "Who are the church people who know these things?" We were, and still are, too clergy-centered.

RP: It was here that you began your emphasis on the ministry of the laity?

CH: Yes, I set about through the Social Education and Action unit to in-

crease lay participation on economic issues. I want to make it clear I did not do anything which wasn't approved by the official body. It took me two years to find these lay people. I would ask friends, "Do you know of an employer who...?" After a while when I would meet an old friend, before I would speak, he or she would say, "No, Cameron, I don't know anybody for your committee." Anyway, we finally set up the committee under the leadership of Douglas Falconer¹³ of blessed memory to me. He was head of the Community Fund of New York. The fund solicited funds for the charities from the business and banking industry. Tiny Hoffman¹⁴ was from labor, he represented the hosiery workers. There was someone from Detroit with the railroad workers. And John Ramsay¹⁵ was an organizer with the steelworkers. From management we had Kendall from Dow Chemical, and T. G. Sinclair from a packing company, and Nelson Graves from Barcalo Manufacturing. We had thirteen lay people and three ministers.¹⁶ We met and drew up this statement on "The Church and Industrial Relations." Douglas Falconer presented it to the 156th General Assembly which met in Chicago in 1944. It passed without a problem.

RP: What is your opinion of its acceptance in the denomination?

CH: We had a statement by an ecclesiastical body which represented the best thinking of a carefully selected group. This was significant in two ways. First, it was from a group of lay people, and second, it took up an area of controversy. These are both important. It was a ground-breaking action for the church. One other thing comes to mind. The Social Education and Action (SEA) department had an hour and a half on each General Assembly docket—a half hour for a speaker of our choosing, another half hour for presentation of the SEA report, and a half hour for questions. There was the tradition at the General

Assembly that the speaker we normally had would be someone like the general secretary of the Lord's Day Alliance. In consultation with our committee, we asked Tiny Hoffman, from the American Federation of Hosiery Workers (CIO) to speak to the General Assembly for a half hour. That was the first time a labor leader had ever spoken before the General Assembly.

Six years after I had left the Social Education and Action department to go to the Federal Council of Churches, the report was reprinted. It was still a significant statement after ten years.

RP: When did you move to the Federal Council of Churches?

CH: In 1946. Jim Myers' health had been failing so they invited me to take his place in the Division of Industrial Relations. Jim had done the job that was needed at that point in history. But times were different from where Jim had started years before. Labor had come a long way. Walter Reuther¹⁷ was heading the auto workers and Philip Murray¹⁸ was leading the steelworkers. Out of the sense of conviction that I had for the expertise of lay people it seemed appropriate to revise the church and industrial relations emphasis in the Federal Council.

In conversation with Charlie Taft,¹⁹ the chairman of the Federal Council, and Dr. Sam Cavert,²⁰ the general secretary, it was decided to change the composition of the Industrial Relations Division. There was only one employer in the division, and he was a Quaker from Philadelphia. I suggested that we needed to create a voice of Protestantism on economic life issues. We decided to hold a national study conference on "The Church and Economic Life" in Pittsburgh in February 1947. Nearly 400 people attended that conference. It was the first of its kind. Denominations were given quotas for bankers, industrialists, farmers, professional people, and some clergy. Paul Hoffman²¹ of Studebaker was one of our leaders. Chester Barnard²²

of New Jersey Bell Telephone also played a part. We assumed nothing. We give the group of nearly 400 three simple questions: First, "Should the church be concerned about economic life?" Yes or no. Second, "If so, why? If not, why?" And third, "If yes, how to go about it?" That's all they talked about. They came out with a strong affirmative. That gave us some leads.

RP: What did you do with their answers?

CH: I got back from Pittsburgh feeling we had a bear by the tail. It engendered so much movement. In any enterprise I was responsible for, I was as much interested in what there was to mop up, if anything. After Pittsburgh, there was nothing to mop up. There was only forward movement. I knew that we did not have enough resources. We had something bigger than industrial relations. We had economic life, which included the farmer and parity, as well as the worker and wages.

I saw that two things were necessary. One was a stronger organizational base than the Division of Industrial Relations. The second was more money. In the case of the second, Paul Hoffman played an important part. He was then president of Studebaker. I called him and asked, "When can I come and see you?" He said he was coming to New York in the next week and he would drop by the office. That said something about Paul Hoffman. I was just Cameron Hall, on the job for six months, and Paul came to the office. He had headed the Pittsburgh Conference. So I asked him, "Would you head up a committee to find funds?" He said, "I'm a maverick," and he was, but he continued, "I'll work with anybody." Paul went down the list of attendees and chose the name of Chester Barnard, the president of New Jersey Bell. Barnard's work at Bell in technological research would be an analog to the work of NASA today. Paul said, "You tell Chester that I'll help."

On my way over to New Jersey to see Chester Barnard I thought of every argument in the book I could use to convince him. When I got there, what do you think? He told me he was on the Rockefeller Foundation. He had already raised with the foundation the need to keep up with the times. And the times were such that foundation funds ought to be spent on issues like health, medicine, and sanitation. So the foundation had appointed him to a committee to be the eyes and ears of the foundation. He had been to the Pittsburgh Conference and had come back with the feeling, on the strength of what he had seen, that the Federal Council might be that cause.

RP: What happened out of that conversation?

CH: Chester Barnard told me I would be hearing from the Rockefeller Foundation's man in the social and economic area on what they might do for the Federal Council. So we talked, and they gave us a grant of \$125,000 to do a study and a report on "The Church and Economic Life." Usually when they give grants for a study the money goes to a university and the university frees up one of its professors to do the study. We couldn't do that. All we could say is, "We as a committee will do the study." They gave us the money anyway.

The vision I had for the Social Education and Action department of the Presbyterians, now materialized in the Division on the Church and Industrial Relations. The General Board of the Federal Council of Churches adopted a provision that "The Church and Industrial Relations" be renamed "The Church and Economic Life" and that it have a committee of one hundred twenty-five people, a majority of whom would be lay people from business, industry, agriculture, and the economic field. So there we were. The first chairperson was Arthur Flemming,²³ of blessed memory, still a blessed memory. He was superb. In a group that large—one hundred twenty-

five remember—you had different points of view. That's an understatement. If you tried to force anybody into an opinion or deny anybody, you were lost. Arthur Flemming, during the war, had chaired a government committee whose task was to deal with both labor and management and arrive at consensus—no, unanimity—on certain stated policies on prices and wages. Unanimity. Now that's a job! Arthur was asked to be our chair.

RP: What was his background?

CH: He was president of Ohio Wesleyan, with an itch for government. He had been, when I came to know him, chair of the Civil Service Commission of the government. Then he became the secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under Eisenhower, and then he was appointed to head the Commission on Human Relations following Ted Hesburgh²⁴ of Notre Dame. He's too good a man for Reagan, who fired him.

So Arthur was our first chair, and he set the mood. Then came Charlie Taft; when he gave up the presidency of the National Council of Churches, he took over as our chair. He was chairperson for eighteen years. He had that quality. He used to quote from Oliver Cromwell that you not only have to speak your opinion, but listen to other's opinions. I give credit to Charlie. We met three times a year, and we went all day Friday. They were bears for work, on into Friday evening and then into Saturday morning as well. Time would be drawing close to adjourning, and I would begin to fidget because we hadn't voted. Then some moment would come and Charlie would say, "Let's have a vote." The vote would go off, not always unanimously, but with only two or three against. The point is, his sense of timing was better than mine.

When we went into the National Council from the Federal Council, the whole apparatus went along. We took up some very controversial subjects. We not only had labor people, and some-

times that's overlooked, we had some very strong employers. We started with the vice-president of Esso. We had the vice-president of Goodyear. We had the vice-president of American Motors Corporation. We had a strong labor backing. One of them was Al Whitehouse²⁵ of the steelworkers. He was regional chairman of District No. 9, working out of Cincinnati. Al was one of our most faithful members. He went to work at fourteen years. He was an authentic labor person. He was one of the greatest Christians I'd ever met—tremendous. He had a view of tithing. Some Christians say we give to the government, to give to the poor and the hungry. To Al, that was cutting the gospel short. The gospel tells you to tithe your income, and he paid his taxes and tithed too.

RP: What you are saying then is, in your vision, that lay people were not only representing their particular union or their corporation's point of view, but they were Christians saying, "This is where, as a Christian, I perceive we should be in labor, or where we should be in the corporation."

CH: Yes. You had to accept these people. They were corporation people, and that was part of their view. But they were also Christians. We wanted people who were corporation people, but who were also concerned Christians. That's what we got. And the same with the labor people.

Now if a person maintained out of his Christian convictions that what the corporation does with this particular issue is right—all right, he's entitled to his view, just as a labor person is entitled to his view. The thing to do is to get these two kinds of people together with agriculture and have them agree on something. I am not saying we had unanimity—there were seldom more than two or three who would dissent on an issue.

One thing I want to emphasize is that there are lay people, enough of them, who have a Christian concern about