

Charles Stelzle and the Roots of Presbyterian Industrial Mission

by *Richard P. Poethig*

IN 1903 THE BOARD OF HOME MISSIONS of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., organized the Workingmen's Department. It was the first officially endorsed program by an American Protestant denomination to minister to working people in the United States. In its creation of the Workingmen's Department, the Presbyterian Church had not only broken new ground for its mission in the United States, but had entered the Social Gospel movement.¹

The organization of a program to reach working people came at a propitious time in the history of the Presbyterian Church. It, among U.S. Protestant denominations, had been slow in responding to the conditions of working people in the burgeoning urban centers and industrial cities of the nation. Prior to its action in 1903 the Presbyterian Church had viewed the growing industrial working class with distress and apprehension. By the end of the nineteenth century it could no longer avoid the dramatic changes which immigration and industrialization were bringing to the nation.

As immigrants from Europe poured into the cities of the northeast and midwest United States in the late nineteenth century, city congregations were aroused to action. The immediate response of many city churches was to follow their displaced members to new locations away from the working class

sections of the city. By the 1890s, the Board of Home Missions began to take seriously the need for evangelization among the newcomers in the cities. The Home Mission Board Report of 1894 stated "what the cities are, the country will be in all the phases of national life."² The report went on to reassert its fear of immigration and called for evangelization as a strategy to curb that threat: "Every thoughtful man must have some conceptions of the peril that must arise from the presence in our country of such multitudes of people, a large percent of whom were reared under institutions alien and antagonistic to our own. We shall continue to see the evils and fear the perils until these people become Americanized and Christianized."³

As the century turned new leadership was brought into the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions in the person of Charles L. Thompson. It was a fortunate choice for the Presbyterian Church. Thompson, after several successful pastorates, his most recent at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, was an effective city pastor. At Madison Avenue he had led his well-to-do congregation in a ministry among the new immigrants on the city's East Side. In a break with the old ecclesiastical system, which he believed fostered the separation of the classes, Thompson had set the congregation's ministry within a larger social gospel con-

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text. Thompson saw the ministry of the church working for "not merely salvation for eternity, but of the whole man in the regeneration of society."⁴ It was Thompson's foresight that set in motion a program to reach workingmen in the United States. The author of the plan was an evangelist named Charles Stelzle. In 1903, under Charles Thompson's urging, the Board of Home Missions established the Workingmen's Department and put Charles Stelzle at its head. The Presbyterian Church was again fortunate in its choice. Stelzle was uniquely equipped to carry out a ministry among working people.

I

Charles Stelzle had been born on the lower East Side of New York to German immigrant parents in 1869.⁵ He was the eldest child and the only son born to John and Dora Uhlendorf Stelzle, who both came from middle class families. His mother's father had been a successful baker whose business had a citywide reputation in New York. After making a substantial living he returned to his native town in Hanover, Germany. Stelzle's father John, who had his own brewery, was an inept businessman. When the elder Stelzle died, he left the family deeply in debt. Stelzle's mother Dora, unwilling to ask help from her own family, moved with her five children to the tenement district of the lower East Side. At one point she considered sending Charles to live and be educated with her family's help in Hanover. At the last minute as Charles was preparing to take the ship to Germany, she relented and refused to let him go.⁶

Thus it was that Charles Stelzle grew up in this lower East Side neighborhood with its poverty and immigrant cultural traditions. During their life in the tenements the Stelzle family lived either in basement apartments or on the top floor because of the lower rents. At the age of eight he went to work stripping tobacco leaves in a sweatshop across from his family's tenement apartment. He left school at the age of eleven to

help the family with his meager earnings as a "cutter" in an artificial flowershop. Through a cousin's connections he was hired at age fifteen at R. Hoe's Company, one of the city's largest printing press manufacturers. He worked at R. Hoe's for nearly nine years, rising to the position of machinist.

The only diploma Stelzle received from any institution was the engraved certificate from the R. Hoe Company for the completion of his apprenticeship. Although he attended night school, much of his education was informal, through self-study and the generous help of tutors. In Stelzle's own words: "By the time I was fourteen I had a fairly good smattering of the arts and sciences. But what stayed with me longest and had the greatest influence on me was the knowledge of the Bible which I acquired one summer while I was convalescing from an illness."⁷

Early in his time at R. Hoe, Stelzle learned the meaning of the solidarity of the workforce. This was to undergird his later views of unions. In one case, an industrious Yankee mechanic constantly began his work earlier than the rest of his fellow workers. He started his machine at 6:45 when the beginning time was 7:00 A.M. This brought on the ire of the rest of the shop. He increased their hostility when he continued to work when the rest of the men went out on strike. Stelzle sympathized with his industry, but saw that his conduct created discord and anger among his fellow workers who were adamant in their solidarity against an arbitrary management. Stelzle summarized the situation:

The average workingman is more afraid of being out of a job than he is of going to hell. The possibility of losing my job in the Hoe press works constantly hung over me, although there was no particular cause for me to have feared that catastrophe. Nevertheless the feeling that for any one of a number of reasons the boss could fire me if he felt so disposed made me almost bitter toward him.⁸

Besides his intense involvement in his job, Stelzle was regular in his attendance at Sunday school in his teen years. He attended a number of East Side chapels, but was most attracted to the "warm and sympathetic"

environment of Hope Chapel, then under the direction of Dr. W. J. McKittrick. Under the tutorship of McKittrick, Stelzle studied English grammar, plane geometry, and mathematics three nights during the week. Besides his studies with McKittrick, he broadened his learning in other fields. "I studied Latin with a Jewish peddler, Greek with a Brooklyn lawyer, and Hebrew in an extension course, and I could read each of those languages fairly well."⁹

As Stelzle developed skills as a machinist, his industry impressed the superintendent at R. Hoe. Stelzle was proud of his skills and of his work at Hoe. He saw his time there as "his training school, his university, his seminary." But he longed for something more. During these working years he remained active in church and in the Y.M.C.A., conducting Sunday schools and initiating a mission on the outskirts of Brooklyn. After nine years as a machinist—one year as a beginner, five as an apprentice, and three as a journeyman—Stelzle made a decision to enter the ministry. The superintendent responded with disbelief. He offered Stelzle a job as his assistant and held out the possibility that he could be his successor. Stelzle took a week to agonize over the offer. Finally he returned to tell the superintendent that he felt the call to enter the "Gospel ministry."

Stelzle applied to Princeton, Union, and McCormick seminaries, but none would admit him without a college degree. Finally Moody Institute in Chicago allowed him to matriculate for the year 1893–94. For his summer field work in 1894 he was sent to establish Sunday schools in northern Minnesota. By the end of the summer he had organized more Sunday schools than the combined efforts of the five regular missionaries in the rest of the state. On his way back through Minneapolis a prominent lumberman who had heard of his success hired him to take charge of a mission chapel in the north section of the city. Stelzle stayed long enough to revitalize the mission chapel and establish one of the largest boys' clubs in the city.¹⁰

In 1897 Stelzle was called back to New

York to conduct the program of the Hope Chapel, the place of his religious beginnings. Stelzle was soon in conflict with the elders from the uptown sponsoring congregation. They had instructed him not to change anything in the chapel program. He fought to have the mission congregation control their own affairs. Unsuccessful in his efforts, he was on his way west again in 1899. Here he was called to develop the work of the Markham Mission Chapel, a workingman's congregation in St. Louis. Stelzle's organizing abilities were given free rein in St. Louis and by 1902 the Sunday school had grown to 1,400 people, the largest in the Presbyterian Church west of the Mississippi. Impressed with his work at the Markham Chapel, the St. Louis Presbytery, after a strenuous four-hour examination of Stelzle, voted to ordain him in 1901.¹¹

Stelzle's success with working people soon came to the attention of others in Missouri. He was invited as a speaker at a ministers' conference in Joplin, a mining town in southwest Missouri. In his speech on "The Workingman and the Westminster Confession of Faith," he called his listeners' attention to the scarcity of working people in Joplin churches, while the city streets were filled with them. Someone in the audience challenged him to conduct an evangelistic meeting on the streets of Joplin. Stelzle accepted and announced an evening meeting on a busy Joplin street corner. Mingling in the crowd of miners were a number of dignified Presbyterian ministers from all over the state. As he stood on the seat of a carriage he saw the sign of a clothing dealer named Gottlieb. He told his audience that was his text for his sermon—the love of God. At the edge of the crowd was Dr. John Dixon, one of the secretaries from the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions. He had come from New York to bring greetings to the Joplin gathering. Impressed with Stelzle's skills with working people, he returned to New York to tell Charles Thompson, the general secretary of the board, about Stelzle and the plans he had outlined to reach workingmen in the United States.¹²

Charles Thompson invited Stelzle to New York. For three days Stelzle explained his views of ministry to workingmen. Thompson was impressed with Stelzle's grasp of the problems of working people and with his understanding of their spiritual needs. After hearing Stelzle, Thompson made the decision to organize a department strictly to engage in ministry to workingmen.

II

The Workingmen's Department was a new departure for the Presbyterian Church. The climate at the Board of Home Missions was ready for an innovative ministry among working people. The Presbyterian Church's readiness for a new approach was reflected in the report of the board to the General Assembly in 1903:

The past year has signally illustrated the power of workingmen at any moment to affect economic conditions. It is believed that only the Gospel of Christ can solve the grave problem which is thus presented to the country. It is of the utmost consequence that the Church should be aroused to the necessity of doing more than she has ever done to strengthen her hold upon the working classes.¹³

Stelzle came to his work at the new department as a pioneer. Few ministers had the background or the experience to engage working people directly. Stelzle was signally aware of the chasm existing between the church's middle class membership and the working class. He personally knew the bias which existed among the entrepreneurs in the church against the labor unions. His major task, as Stelzle stated it, was "to interpret the Church to workingmen, to interpret workingmen to the church and to interpret employer and employee to each other."¹⁴

Stelzle was indefatigable in his efforts to bridge the gap between the church and the working class. He instinctively knew the prejudices many working people had about the church. Before he began his work with the national church Stelzle had conducted a survey in 1901 of two hundred labor leaders, probing their attitudes on the church. Their response was overwhelmingly critical.

They saw the churches as "rich men's clubs." Summarizing the responses he received, Stelzle wrote: "To the average workingman the church seems to work in the interest of the capitalist. In fact, the preacher and the wealthy men run everything." The workers, Stelzle analyzed, see the hypocrisy of the church as a stumbling block. "We do not want a man to tell us on Sunday that his heart is bleeding for us and then on Monday refuse us living wages. How can we pray with him on Sunday, when he preys upon us during the week?"¹⁵

Stelzle's job was cut out for him. He set out in 1903 to break the barriers between the church and the workingmen and their unions. His primary advantage was that he had been a workingman and he was basically sympathetic to the trade union movement. His illustrations from the workplace, which he used both in his writings and in his speeches, gave him an entree into the worker's world. He began with the premise that the worker was sympathetic to the teachings and to the figure of Jesus Christ. This premise was corroborated by a second survey Stelzle sent to workingmen soon after he began his national work. It showed that workingmen distinguished between the church of the early 1900s and the church of Jesus Christ. Workingmen, in fact, held orthodox beliefs about Christianity, but were repelled by the class nature of the church. In his meetings with workingmen throughout the country, Stelzle was continually surprised at the numbers of those in the leadership of unions who had remained faithful to the church.

One of his first official duties for the Workingmen's Department took him to Cripple Creek, Colorado. His experience at Cripple Creek was to be a harbinger of the climate he would continually contend with in the Presbyterian Church. In 1903, Cripple Creek was the setting of a violent struggle between mine owners and the miners. Members of the Western Federation of Miners, a union headed by Bill Haywood, were being rounded up and thrown into a military "bull pen" by the troops of General Sherman Bell, a Spanish-American War veteran. General

Bell was in the pay of the State of Colorado and the Mine Owners Association. Many of the miners were held for weeks on end without charge and without bail. Striking miners were deported from the region and dumped onto the prairie hundreds of miles from their homes.

In the midst of this struggle Stelzle discovered that the president of the local union in Cripple Creek was a Presbyterian elder. Stelzle was continually being made aware that there were those among working people who took their religious identification seriously. When Stelzle returned to Denver he delivered a speech on the role of the church in modern industrial problems. His reference to the situation in Cripple Creek aroused the antagonism of the local press and the employers who were members of Presbyterian congregations. Stelzle reflected on the situation: "It was rather curious that while I was in Cripple Creek district the churches were afraid that in my public addresses I might antagonize labor; but when I arrived in Denver the churches were afraid I might antagonize the employers."¹⁶

As he reviewed the Cripple Creek episode some years later, Stelzle said that the local media had already prejudiced his mission, which was to bring the miners and the employers together. Stelzle knew that there were Presbyterian elders both among the miners and the employers. Instead he was perceived by one employer as an agent of "the American Federation of Labor assuming the guise of a Presbyterian preacher." In responding to this accusation Stelzle writes:

Apparently the only group that believed in my sincerity of purpose and in the genuineness and value of my work was the trade-unionists. Nor was this interest on the part of the workingmen secured by playing up to them. I spoke to the workingmen in their labor halls as plainly as I could regarding their responsibility toward their employers, the Church and the community. But they also knew that I was talking as frankly to the other crowd about their responsibility, and they felt confident that I was not trying to deceive them.¹⁷

Stelzle saw pastors as a main constituency in helping the church understand the

problems of the new industrial working class. The issue was not to win over workers who were bitter against the church, but to reach those who were indifferent. That indifference, Stelzle believed, was deepened by the fact that the pastors had little to say to industrial workers. Stelzle accounted for this in the largely rural background of most city pastors. In bridging this gap, he organized shop floor meetings in workplaces as a means of bringing local pastors together with workers. In 1906, this effort accounted for one thousand shop meetings in six cities which reached an audience of 200,000 working people. Stelzle also set in motion a plan to exchange 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.

Stelzle had come on the labor scene at a crucial moment. Samuel Gompers, who was known for his bias against religious leaders, recognized the need to develop allies within church bodies. He saw in Stelzle a useful spokesperson for the goals of the trade union movement. Stelzle's ability to raise the cause of unionism to a moral level appealed to those trade unionists who saw in the labor movement more than monetary goals. It was, in fact, this reality of the moral commitments of laboring people at the early part of the century that provided Stelzle with his most effective avenue for reaching them.

Stelzle was soon writing a weekly syndicated column which appeared in over three hundred labor newspapers and other journals. His articles provided religious insights into the everyday life of working people. Stelzle writes: "The articles which contained the most Scripture and the most frequent references to Bible stories were always given the biggest headlines. Here again was a demonstration of the fact that workingmen responded more eagerly to the religious appeal."¹⁸ A number of city newspapers across the country began picking up his columns and printing them in their Saturday editions. Stelzle points out the effectiveness of his access to the labor press for the church:

If the Board had been obliged to print this material in pamphlet form or distribute it as effectively as these articles were distributed among individual working men through the labor press, it would have cost more each week than the entire annual budget of the Department. A study of the situation revealed the fact that the Department distributed more literature for workingmen in this manner than was printed by all of the tract societies of the United States combined, of which there were something like sixty.¹⁹

Stelzle's acceptance by the leadership of the American Federation of Labor was concretized in 1905 by an invitation to address the A.F. of L. convention in Pittsburgh. He was received at the Pittsburgh meeting as the first fraternal delegate from the churches, representing the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. He attended twelve successive A.F. of L. conventions, in the latter years as the representative of the Federal Council of Churches. In line with Stelzle's efforts to develop fraternal relations between local unions and ministerial associations, the A. F. of L. at its 1905 convention made the pronouncement: "Resolved that the American Federation of Labor recommends that all affiliated State and central bodies exchange fraternal delegates with the various State and city ministerial associations wherever practicable, thus insuring a better understanding on the part of the Church and the clergy of the aims and the objects of the labor union movement of America."²⁰ The 1906 convention of this labor body gave official endorsement to Stelzle's ministry among working people.

In 1906 the name of the Workingmen's Department was changed to the Department of Church and Labor. In an effort to introduce the issues of work within the churches in the United States, Stelzle introduced the practice 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 ministers in their areas in making the day a success. A report on Labor

Sunday in 1906 tells of a larger number of workingmen attending "church than on any previous Sunday in the history of the labor movement. Many pastors write that the men are still attending the services."²¹

By 1907 the work of Stelzle among working people had become nationally known. In that year the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church took official action commending his work as "one of the providential movements of the day, to be sustained and encouraged by all who would win the workingmen back to the Church."²² 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 work attracted fifteen thousand workingmen to a mass meeting at the Coliseum. He addressed the crowd on "A Square Deal" in which he argued for "a square deal for the boss, the workingman, for the Church and for Jesus." A journal of the day called the occasion "the largest mass meeting of workingmen ever assembled within walls in the history of labor unionism."²³

III

Another of Stelzle's skills was his use of social surveys and studies. Stelzle laid the foundation for the use of sociology in church planning by reinforcing his program through social research and surveys, heavily buttressed by statistical information. At the 1907 General Assembly action was taken authorizing the creation of a Department of Immigration. Recognizing the common issues involved in immigration and in labor, Stelzle was asked in 1908 to assume direction of the Department of Immigration along with his work for the Department of Church and Labor. Stelzle states that the work was given to him because, "first,...the Labor Department had proven to be so successful, second ...practically all immigrants were workingmen, and third....for the most part the immigrant was a city 'problem' and practically all of my activities were centered in the city."²⁴ As outlined by the Board of Home Missions,



The Reverend Charles Stelzle, superintendent of the Department of Church and Labor, PCUSA. (Half-tone image from *The Congregationalist and Christian World*, 4 June, 1910.)

the work of the Department of Immigration was to engage in sociological research on "the conditions of social and religious life in the lands from which immigrants came."²⁵ Information gathering was to be done at the places of immigrant entry into the United States in an effort to learn the destination of the immigrants. The Department of Immigration was to be a bureau of information in aiding local urban churches across the country to conduct programs of Christian work among immigrants.

In 1909, Stelzle's Department of Immigration carried out four one-day conferences concentrating on work among four groups of immigrants: Hungarians, Italians, Ruthenians, and Jews. The sociological study conducted by the department concentrated on the religious and social conditions of the immigrant peoples on Manhattan Island. The department's sociological work was so detailed that the charts and statistics it produced were used by the New York State Commission for the Study of the Immigrant Problem as well as the Russell Sage Foundation Fund and the Young Women's Christian Association workers. So thorough was this

work that the 1909 General Assembly declared that the departments of the Church and Labor and Immigration "shall in so far as may be practicable, upon application of any local church, presbytery or synod, study such problems in the locality to which the application relates, outline plans for local work, and aid in making such work efficient."²⁶

By late 1910 the combined work of Stelzle's two departments had so expanded that the decision was made to separate them. On November 1, 1910 William Payne Shriver was made the superintendent of the Department of Immigration, thereby relieving Stelzle to concentrate on work with the church and workingmen.²⁷

IV

Early in his work Stelzle had established the reputation as a practical "social gospel-er" within the interchurch community. His help was continually sought across denominational lines. In 1904 Stelzle had written a book about reaching boys on the streets.²⁸ This work came to the attention of Dr. Elias Sanford, the secretary of the Open and Institutional Church League, who asked him to speak about organizing street boys' programs to the league's 1905 annual meeting.²⁹ The Open and Institutional Church League had been organized in 1896 by church leaders who were concerned that the major denominations were continually deserting the working-class districts of the cities. The plan of the league organizers, pastors from large city churches, was aimed at carrying out efforts on behalf of social salvation in "an aggressive evangelistic, educational, and 'institutional' program" in the working-class areas of the cities.³⁰ Charles Thompson, Stelzle's mentor, had been one of the organizers of the league at the time of his pastorate at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church.

The work of the Open and Institutional Church League and the energy of Dr. Sanford were instrumental in laying the groundwork for the organization of the Federal Council of Churches. The Federal Council had be-

gun as a dream of Elias Sanford as he carried the message of interdenominational cooperation and planning across the country. The organizing committee for the Federal Council of Churches heard its first report in 1906. Stelzle was already a leading figure in the organizing efforts of the Federal Council. At this first meeting he was asked to speak on "The Church and Organized Labor."³¹ At the Philadelphia meeting creating the Federal Council of Churches in 1908, a special event was convened on behalf of church and labor to reach that city's workingmen. D. A. Hayes, fifth vice-president of the America Federation of Labor, Bishop E. R. Hendrix, president of the Federal Council, and Charles Stelzle spoke to the assembled crowd of working people. Hayes later stated that the meeting was the largest gathering of workers he had ever seen in Philadelphia.

The organization of the Federal Council of Churches brought together the representatives of thirty denominations. The major speech to the assembled representatives was made by Dr. Frank Mason North, chair of the Committee on the Church and Modern Industry. His speech on "The Church and Modern Industry" included in its eighteen pages a paragraph in which he called for the churches' support of social principles on behalf of "the toilers of America."³² Following Dr. North's speech, Charles Stelzle was asked to give a supporting statement on behalf of the principles. Stelzle reports, "It was the only address given, and following my half hour speech the resolutions were unanimously adopted by the Council."³³ The statement of social principles which Stelzle lifted from North's speech and which was passed by the assembled delegates thus became "The Social Creed of the Churches."

With the Federal Council of Churches thus constituted, the body created commissions to deal with the central societal problems the churches were facing in 1908. Stelzle became the voluntary secretary of the Commission on the Church and Social Service, of which Frank Mason North was the chair. "During the year that I was its secretary," Stelzle writes, "I conducted the

activities of the Commission in addition to my responsibilities with the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions. The work consisted largely of enlisting the interest of the other denominations in social service work and in making certain studies of social and industrial conditions and problems."³⁴

In 1910, soon after the Commission on the Church and Social Service was constituted, it was called to take part in an investigation of a steel strike at South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It was the first such investigation of an industrial conflict by a church body. The issue that called the strike to the attention of the commission was the firing of three machinists by Bethlehem Steel on February 4, 1910 for protesting Sunday work. The discharged machinists were immediately joined by several hundred other steelworkers who supported their brother workers' stand against Sunday work. None of those who joined in the strike were members of a union. The Commission on the Church and Social Service saw the strike as directly related to its concern over Sunday work—an issue highlighted by the Social Creed's advocacy of "release from employment one day in seven." More damning for the churches was the strikers' accusation that the local clergy of Bethlehem had supported management in its action. In response to the strike, the Federal Council of Churches appointed Charles Stelzle as chair of an investigating committee which included Josiah Strong, renowned for his work on the church and social service, and Paul Kellogg, editor of *The Survey*. John Fitch, who had previously made a study of the Pittsburgh steel industry, was called upon to assist in the preparation of the report. The committee's inquiry into the Bethlehem strike produced a twenty-one page report—the first such study of an industrial conflict by a church-related organization.³⁵

Stelzle immediately recognized that the issues involved in the Bethlehem steel strike had ramifications beyond the churches' concern. The striking machinists, Stelzle pointed out, had "not only raised issues which concerned the nine thousand men employed in the steel works, but brought to the attention