



## Working and Ministry

Few social issues have more wide-scale importance in our time than those which cluster around working. Working consumes most of the day and life-span of most people. Lack of work, as a means of livelihood, is feared nearly as much as terminal illness. Unfortunately it is the lot of far too many in the midst of our great wealth and resources.

The shifts taking place in regard to working in America are of tremendous theological and spiritual significance. Traditional communities, in which the “work ethic” has been strong for generations—particularly in mining towns and the smokestack cities of the north and east—have been beset by a sense of futility. The old admonition—“work hard, and keep out of trouble, and all will turn out well”—may have been good news in such places at one time, for it could be more or less verified by experience. But today such platitudes can be vain and empty promises to the unemployed.

Christian social teaching regarding work and related issues is in need of attention and development. The rule of thumb has been that American Protestants have tended to be white-collar workers—with the notable exception of those from Lutheran lands, who have tended to be blue-collar workers, small businessmen, and farmers. One should expect, then, that particularly among Lutherans there would be a social consciousness concerning those who do the “hard work” of physical labor—or are willing to do it—in the cities and on the farms.

But American Christians have entered the present era without a means (a social ethic and program), except to open up food shelves in the cities and the mining areas hit hardest by unemployment. Something went wrong along the way.

Economic policies are clearly determined by political processes. The Roman Catholic bishops in the U.S. have come to realize this; therefore the National Conference of Catholic Bishops is preparing a pastoral letter on “Catholic Social Teaching and the American Economy,” which will relate Catholic social teaching to (1) the generating of employment; (2) adequate income for the poor;

(3) U.S. trade with developing countries; and (4) economic planning and policy (including labor-management relations and plant relocatings). Surely the same consciousness and activity should be stirred up among Protestants.

Clustering around working are other issues as well. Whether it should be the case or not, “vocation” and what one “does for a living” have been fused together in common parlance. How in modern times does one gain a sense of vocation when the phenomena of retraining, relocating, and job- or career-switching for the second, third, or fourth time are so common and taken for granted? New “literacies” are being required, even while functional illiteracy remains high. But even the call for better education in the schools is met by a sense of fatigue among those in the

teaching profession, from whom so much is required: surrogate parent, role model, disciplinarian, values-former, vocational counselor, liaison to social services, friend, and teacher. And high school and college students are pessimistic about the future for many reasons, including its perceived deficiency of meaningful work opportunities.

This issue takes a fresh look at certain issues around working today. *Joel Oines* writes concerning ways that the church can minister to working people through setting apart time for rest, helping them reflect on the consequences of their work, and seeking to create community in the workplace. *Mark Gibbs* sorts out in a crisp and lively way the distinctions between vocation, work, and work for pay. He underscores the importance and integrity of each and says that, while work for pay is indeed important and expected of so many, it is not all there is to work. He goes on to suggest ways we can affirm the work of laity properly in the context of worship (and what ought to be avoided). *Louis Almen* discusses factors which make the concept of vocation difficult to communicate today, reviews socioeconomic realities of the last half century affecting work and the concept of vocation, takes a fresh look at the Reformation concept of vocation, and suggests the development of an effort in the church to help lay persons carry out their ministry in the world. *Richard Luecke* provides a review of the development of socioeconomic structures in which work takes place, raises the point that social achievement is not necessarily the same as economic achievement, and suggests guidelines and strategies for churches in efforts toward community development. *Nelvin Vos* reminds us that the church is the body of Christ in the world, and the whole church is to be involved in ministry. Ministry in this sense is not doing “church work” (as too many assume), and a theology of the laity is not theology made simple, but theology made contextual and accenting the doctrines of baptism, creation, and the variety of gifts for service. *Penelope Washbourn* discusses the dilemmas of women in the workplace, including the pressures which they face in away that men usually do not. She calls upon the church to recover aspects of its understanding of work and vocation, in order to help create a more humane society which allows for a harmonious balance between responsibilities in both the workplace and the home. *Martin Heinecken* reflects on how the doctrine of vocation applies to the retired. He says that the opportunities and responsibilities of such persons are no less urgent and challenging than before. He also calls attention to the plight of many of our elderly, which is a scandal in our affluent society. The article is also of interest

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because it relates personal experiences and gives a perspective on life in retirement by one who is there.

The Resources section contains three timely articles. *Laura Deming* and *Jack Stubbs* discuss the two-career marriage in which one partner is an ordained minister; they review expectations generally held by congregations, and they offer specific suggestions on how to relate to the congregation and to each other. *Speed Leas* assumes that there will be conflict in the parish, but he differentiates between five levels of conflict and prescribes appropriate responses to each. *David Tiede* has written the “Texts in Context” essay, which focuses on the texts from 1 Peter prescribed in the ecumenical lectionary for the Sundays of Easter in the current year.

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