

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE DIALOGUE

Number 1 in a Series

Reverend Ledyard Baxter, Pastor - Edited by Hank Boerner
Published for the Old Steeple Community Church Community

June 27, 2004

Aquebogue, New York 11931

COMMENTARY ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY -- AND ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

These terms are becoming more familiar to us as the general news media focus on such issues as the growing disparity in wages and income in our country. (For example, contrasting the generous pay packages of some CEOs with the declining real wages and purchasing power of the company's rank and file workers.) Or, examining conditions under which the consumer products that we purchase here in Riverhead or the North Fork are being manufactured in distant lands -- factories employing child labor, workers earning pitifully low wages, unsafe factory conditions, being paid on piece work vs. receiving livable hourly wages, use of forced labor in factories, and human rights abuses.

It has been said that over the centuries of the existence of the United States of America, our Christian faith has provided to be the steady and reliable "universal" conscience of the nation. Finally, when terrible wrongs have been corrected -- slavery comes to mind -- it was faith-based movements that eventually brought about needed and dramatic change. This has also been true in "small matters," with the journey of America toward becoming a more caring nation, starting with tiny steps and small deeds from within its local churches. Certainly during the Great Depression of the 1930s, America's churches sustained families and communities, through nourishment of both body and spirit in those terrible dark days...one meal, one set of shoes, one prayer, one day at a time.

Today, we live in arguably the wealthiest nation on *Mother Earth*, and the conscience of the nation continues to be prodded and poked and stirred to action by the Christian faithful who are advocates for economic and social justice for all our citizens. And in this era of globalization, for the world's citizens, and especially those living in abject poverty in less developed or developing countries.

Today the most powerful institutions in our society are large corporations, some having revenues that are actually larger than the total Gross Domestic Products of many nations! And so the focus on the social responsibility or "good citizenship" of these companies. Since many US companies have operations in distant lands and ability to exercise power over suppliers, employees, partners, even sovereign governments, it seems natural for social activists -- the shapers of America's conscience over the long-term -- to bring their requests or pressures to the corporate front door.

For the past three decades, it has been faith-based investors in the vanguard of change, using their pension funds, reserve funds, endowments and other investment vehicles as shareowners to pressure, persuade and cajole companies (in which they have bought stock) to be more socially responsible. Christian Faith-in Action, we could call it here in our local congregation. The most effective group working in this arena, experts agree, is the **Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility** (ICCR), based in New York City.

ICCR is a coalition of almost 300 groups -- including our own **United Church of Christ** -- encompassing Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish denominations, religious orders, healthcare systems, religious affinity mutual funds, labor unions, socially responsible mutual funds, and other concerned investors. ICCR was founded more than 30 years ago.

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***Commentary on Social Responsibility
-- and Economic and Social Justice
(continued)***

Among the issues ICCR coalition members are involved in:

- Climate risk and global warming, and energy issues;
- Predatory bank lending;
- Existence of glass ceilings for female employees of corporations;
- Pharmaceutical companies' response (or lack of response) to global or regional health pandemics (think of HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria in African nations);
- Executive compensation, including calls to link CEO pay to improvements in their company's social performance;
- Overseas labor conditions (ICCR publicizes notorious "sweatshop scandals");
- Advancing labor and human rights principles.

ICCR demonstrates the power of unity – across all religious beliefs and congregations, and among those in the vanguard of advancing social and economic justice. (ICCR member portfolios exceed a collective \$110 billion invested in public companies.) The organization's activism includes generating publicity to spotlight companies and issues, bringing corporate proxy resolutions (votes) on matters important to ICCR members, communicating with a range of faith investors on critical issues – and conducting dialogue with target corporations.

Such is the power of faith-based unity and collective action. But as individuals, what can we do? Each of us has the power to begin to make changes to expand economic and social justice and to encourage corporate social responsibility. This may start with writing a letter to a company to express concerns...or to thank a corporate executive for taking a positive decision that benefitted specific stakeholders. We could speak to a local store manager about our social concerns if [the store] is part of a national chain and we have issues with

chain policies or management. Researching an important issue of concern can begin in our home – such as exploring the local impact of global warming. These issues could be the topics of work groups and committees within a parish. Concerns could be brought [for broader discussion] to UCC bodies.

The changes that are going to be made to benefit all humankind could start with one action, one prayer, one letter...resulting in unity as we combine our efforts...and finally, dramatic change for the betterment of our nation and world. If we are investors, we could follow the lead of ICCR and be more proactive in our choice of stocks. There are mutual funds set up to accommodate such investing programs, including the Calvert family of funds, Domini Social Funds and Dreyfus Third Century. Think of your investment as more than money for the future...it can also be a mustard seed for great change.

Planting the mustard seed for growing social and economic justice in our nation is something we can do...as one, and in unity.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

www.iccr.org

(for information on the
Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility)

This information is provided by
Old Steeple Community Church of Aquebogue, New York
(11931), United Church of Christ, founded 1750 and
today serving a farming and semi-suburban community
on Long Island's North Fork.

The dialogue is intended to help further understanding
of current events and trends in social and economic justice,
and in corporate social responsibility.

Reverend Ledyard Baxter, Pastor
Church Office 631.722.3070

Hank Boerner, Dialogue Editor
Telephone 516.248.2383
Email: hank@hankboerner.com