

Striking Out on its Own: Labor and the Modern Church

In 1894, labor leaders and trade activists, disillusioned by the customs of the Protestant establishment, formed a church for the working classes.

HEATH W. CARTER

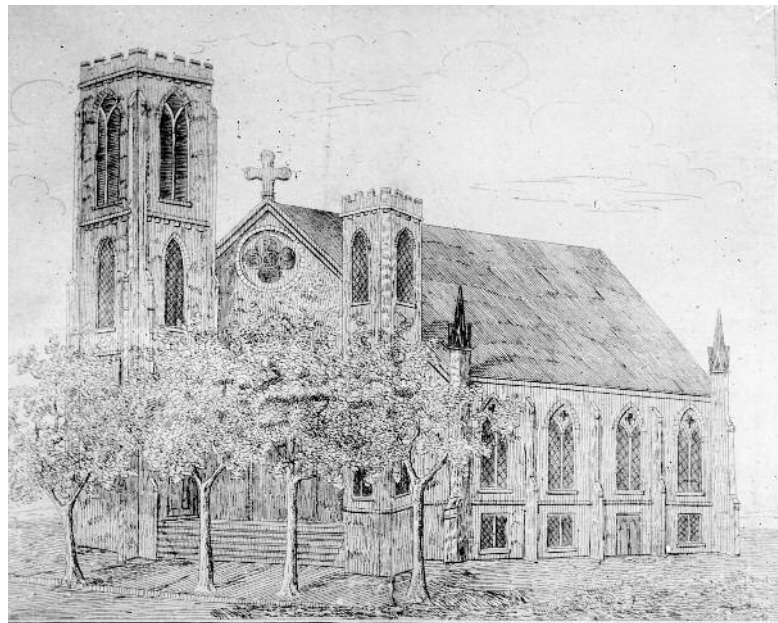
Worry creased the wind-whipped faces of many who braved Chicago's streets the evening of January 22, 1894. A fierce winter storm was on the way, and already the city was locked in the most trying season in memory. The failure of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad the previous February had sent a shock wave through financial markets, and by early May the reverberations had become all too real. As hundreds of corporations collapsed, a tidal wave of unemployment engulfed the nation, leaving destitution in its wake. In Chicago alone, tens of thousands waited in blocks-long bread lines and slept on stone floors inside City Hall. From their vantage, the future appeared as bleak as the gray skies looming over Lake Michigan.

But inside the Grand Pacific Hotel—a monument to opulence, even in the best of times—the world seemed as genial as ever, and it was there, at the corner of State Street and Jackson Boulevard, just across from the Board of Trade, that the Congregational Club of Chicago convened this night. Hundreds of men in their finest attire sauntered in, looking forward to a feast. In years past the menu had featured Blue Point oysters and cream of farina to start; Boston baked beans, steamed brown bread, chicken salad, and potatoes anglaise to accompany tenderloin of beef jardinière and small patties à la Toulouse (puff pasta shells filled with calves' brains, chicken, and mushrooms); and a panoply of after-dinner treats, including pumpkin pie and vanilla ice cream, as well as cakes, doughnuts, fruit, crackers, cheese, and coffee. This crowd demanded nothing less.

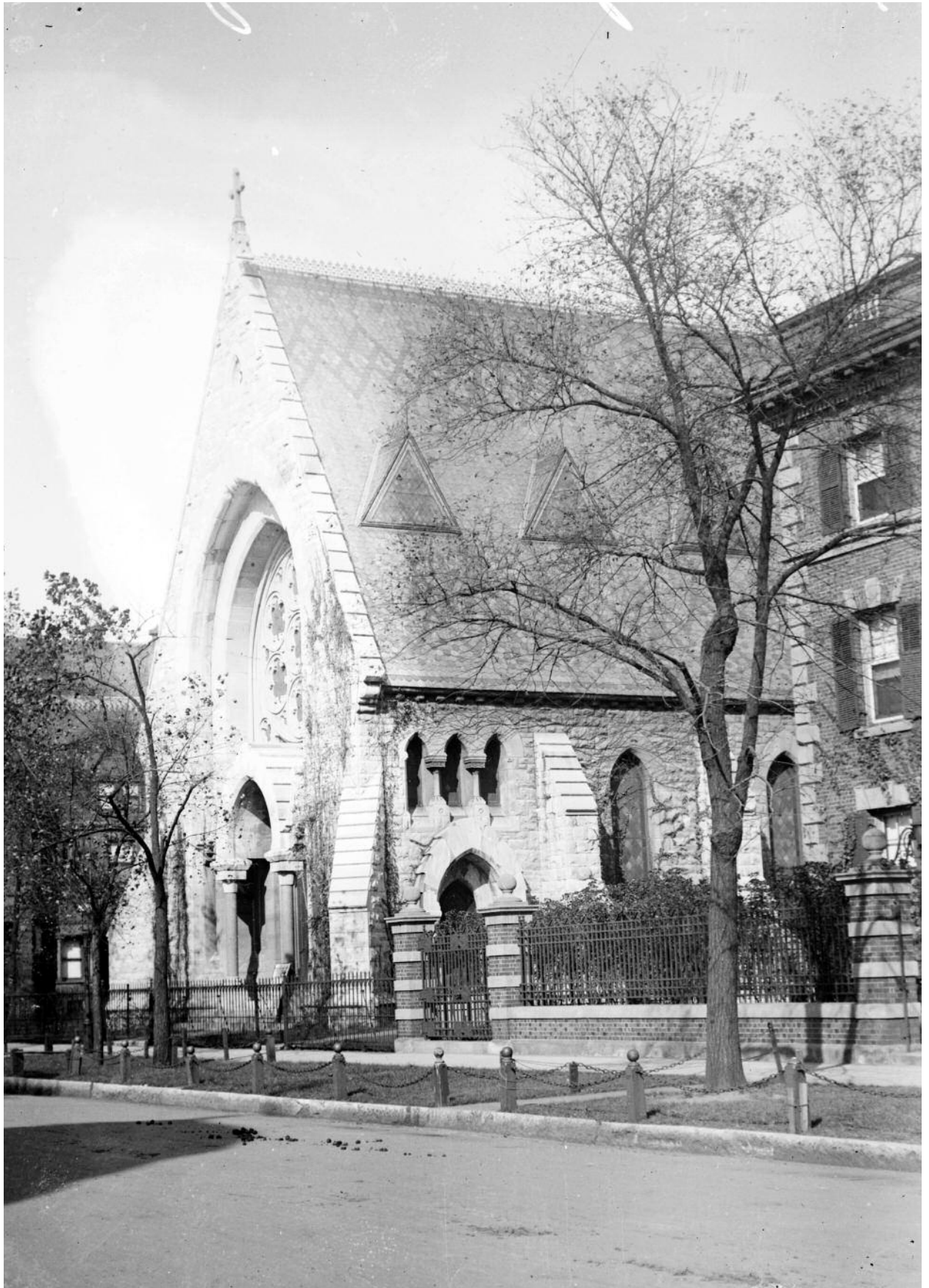
The Congregationalists boasted several of the most impressive church edifices in the entire city, including the New England Congregational Church at Dearborn Avenue and Delaware Street and Plymouth Congregational on South Michigan Avenue between Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth streets. Such buildings projected the power and pres-

tige of those who worshiped in them, men like Major E. D. Reddington, the vice president of the Chicago Life Underwriters' Association, who as the meeting got underway was elected club president. Joining him as new officers were a newspaper executive, a venture capitalist, a publishing agent, and two high-ranking bankers.

This slate showcased the broader ties between Chicago's Protestant establishment and economic elite, which had been so dense for so long that the two groups were almost indistinguishable. Consider, for example, the early history of St. James Episcopal Church, a still-active congregation that was renamed the Cathedral Church of



The stately buildings of St. James Episcopal Church (above, drawn in 1919) and the New England Congregational Church (opposite, 1908) reflected the prestige and social power of their parishioners.



The Workingman's Advocate.

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Workingmen's Advocate.

CHICAGO, DETROIT AND CINCINNATI
SATURDAY, JULY 15, 1876.

Eight Hours.

Of wasting toil for man or woman,
Less hours! less hours! less hours!
For this we hold—the species human,
Excels in value webs of cotton,
Or all the wealth of trade begotton,—
Swell high the song: For man's best powers,
More hours! more hours! more hours!

In factory-jails and shops confining,
Less hours! less hours! less hours!
In all the walks where men are pinning,
Where women pale their shrouds are stitching,
Or where the lab'rer sweats in ditching;
Where ignorance glooms or perjury lowers,
Less hours! less hours! less hours!

What though they cry, 'T will swamp the nation,
Less hours to sweat, less hours?
Believe it never! The salvation
Which elevates our nobler nature,
May even purge the legislature.
Oh, this shall save all precious dowers!
More hours to think, more hours.

Of blasting vice the grand reformer,
Less hours for toil, less hours.
Of castled wrong, resistless stormer;
Temp'rance ere long shall own, caressing,
The winner of the long-sought blessing,
Adorner of all beauteous bowers,—
For thought or rest—more hours.

Wake! sons of toil! Up! power-crushed daughter;
Your own are all the hours.
Rescue from Mammon's cruel slaughter
Heav'n's gift of gifts,—arouse to action!
Be Truth your sword, not murd'rous faction.
Onward in column! mass your powers!
For justice, and EIGHT HOURS!

EDWARD R. PLACE.

St. James in 1921. Founded in 1834, its first generation of parishioners included the likes of William Butler Ogden, John H. Kinzie, Gurdon S. Hubbard, and Walter L. Newberry, names emblazoned on the street signs of twenty-first-century Chicago. Within a generation the church had become an anchor of the elegant Pine Street district, to which many of the city's wealthiest residents flocked. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 decimated the neighborhood, but the St. James congregation had no trouble raising the seventy-three thousand dollars—equal to roughly \$1.36 million today—it took to rebuild in style at the corner of Cass Avenue (now Wabash) and Huron Street. Meanwhile, its parishioners set about constructing even grander homes in the vicinity and by the late 1870s had reestablished themselves on the stately surrounding streets: Rush, Dearborn, and Superior, to name a few. By this time the church had become one of the most exclusive hubs in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the city, which explains why, as one contemporary observed, "It was a well-known saying that no one was 'in society' unless he or she belonged to St. James."

The coziness of the relationship between the local churches and the elite had long irked Chicago's Protestant wage earners, many of whom believed that true Christianity was consonant with the spirit of the labor movement. The editor of the *Workingman's Advocate*, Andrew Cameron, proclaimed in one 1867 column, "[that] the Gospel of Christ sustains us in our every demand." Yet in that same article he lampooned the churches' compromising ways, writing that, "in claiming to be the followers of the Prince of Peace, while they actually abet the robbery of the widow and the orphan, they are guilty of a fraud which even an atheist would scorn to commit." This tension between belief and disaffection grew only more entrenched as the industrial battles of the late nineteenth century intensified. In the wake of the 1877 railroad riots, one struggling worker, after attending the Second Baptist Church's prayer meeting, wrote to the *Daily News*, "I am trying to live the life of a Christian, but when I look at my bosses, who are members of the Christian denomination, I shudder and wonder how they can impose upon us poor miserable creatures through the week; and Sunday you will see them out with their coachman and fine span of horses, going to church, while thousands like myself are plodding along foot sore and hungry." Not until the early 1890s did the city's leading Protestants take such long-

The *Workingman's Advocate* was one of the more prominent labor newspapers of its time. This edition from 1876 includes a poetic rallying cry in support of the eight-hour workday.

simmering discontent seriously, and then many worried it might be too late: were the churches destined to lose their foothold among the people?

Not yet resigned to that fate, the Congregational Club devoted the 1894 annual meeting to a discussion of the "relation of the church to the laboring world." It went so far as to invite two prominent working-class leaders to speak on the theme: Louis W. Rogers, the editor of the *Railway Times*, and L. T. O'Brien, the president of the retail clerks' union. Rogers and O'Brien seemed relatively safe choices. During the previous year, O'Brien had worked with local ministers to rally support for a proposed Sunday-closing ordinance and had helped found the

respectable Civic Federation of Chicago. Both men had close ties to the Trade and Labor Assembly (TLA), which represented the roughly 20 percent of Chicago's workforce that most closely resembled—ethnographically, at least—the Congregational Club members. The TLA tended to attract skilled Anglo-American workers, who sought to reform the existing economic system, not overthrow it. From the perspective of the Protestant elite, any rapprochement with the working classes would have to begin with this group. Those affiliated with the more ethnically and religiously diverse Central Labor Union (CLU), which harbored revolutionary ambitions, seemed already too far beyond the pale.

Chicago Nov. 23 1893

The committee of five consisting of T. W. Harvey Chairman, Rev. H. M. Thomas, Miss Jane Addams, Prof. Dennis, and L. T. O'Brien, appointed at the Central Music Hall meeting Nov. 19 to select a general Executive Committee, who in duty it would be to organize a Civic Federation in Chicago, met at T. W. Harvey's office Nov. 23 and selected forty citizens as said committee sending them the following invitation to wit:

Chicago, Nov. 23, 1893.

Dear Sir:

The committee named at the Central Music Hall meeting Sunday night to appoint an Executive Committee to take in charge the establishment of the proposed Civic Federation in this city, begs leave to inform you of its appointment as a member of the said committee and to inform you of the object of this organization briefly and in terms. The concentration in one potent political non-sectarian center all the forces that are now laboring to advance our philanthropic, industrial, and moral interests to accomplish all that is possible, organizing and giving effect to the public good of Chicago. It is not expected to accomplish this in one day, but all great movements have a beginning and consultation with citizens of all classes who desire to

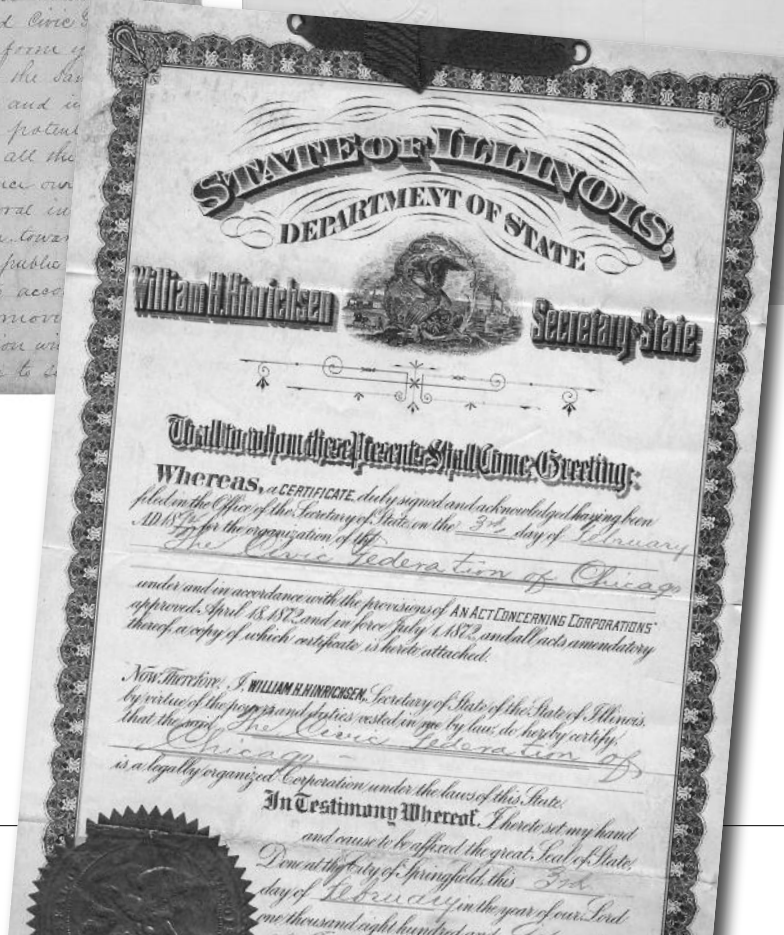
Chicago Typographical Union No. 16.
P. O. Box 420.
OFFICE OF SECRETARY TREASURER.

Chicago, Sept. 7, 1884

To the Trades Assembly,
Wm. P. Douglas is this day appointed a delegate to represent Chicago Typographical Union, No. 16 in the Trades Assembly, vice M. H. Madden, removed for non-attendance.

Jas. B. Fullerton,
President C. T. U. No. 16
Chas. T. Gould,
Secy. Treas.

L. T. O'Brien was among the founding members of the Civic Federation of Chicago. Above: The minutes from the first meeting. Right: The organization's certificate of incorporation. An 1889 letter (above right) from the Chicago Typographical Union to the Trade and Labor Assembly appoints a delegate to act on its behalf.



Within moments of Rogers taking the podium, however, the organizers' strategy looked more like a strategic miscalculation. "What, your committee asks, does [the class known as 'the laboring people'] want?" he began. "It wants an honest share of the wealth it creates. It wants such conditions as shall permit a fair distribution of what is produced. It wants to abolish the conditions that enforce idleness. It wants free access to the resources of nature." Rogers's litany went on. "It wants the abandonment of our wretched inequalities. It wants a place at nature's banquet. It wants an equal chance." In the halls of the Grand Pacific and in front of this crowd, these were fighting words, and Rogers was nowhere near finished. Construing the struggle between capital and labor as the decisive issue of the times, he forged ahead through mounting tension, asking, "Where on this question does the Church stand?"

Rogers paused here to contrast "the ideal Church" with "the Church as it is," a distinction that structured the remainder of his speech. With the former he had no grievance: "I know where Christ stood," he declared. "He was for the poor. He warned the rich, he denounced force and wealth and usury. He toadied to no monopolist, he preached from no palaces, he sold no pews! He was of and for the people." Rogers's enthusiasm for Christianity's founding vision, however, was exceeded only by his outrage at its present state. "The spirit of Jesus is absent from the modern Church," he proclaimed. Instead of siding with the poor, it had befriended the rich. Its close ties to "the Carnegies and Rockefellers" had financed a charitable empire, but this amounted to "the pouring of a little balm on the surface, while the cancer eats at the heart." What the nation really needed was a wholesale renovation of the economic system, Rogers contended, yet this the church would never support: "it is not for labor, and cannot be for labor because it is a pensioner on the system from which labor suffers," he avowed. By the time he resumed his seat, an icy silence prevailed.

Undaunted, O'Brien picked up where his colleague left off, rattling off a list of reasons why laborers found themselves increasingly estranged from local churches. In the first place, low wages prevented them from keeping up with the fashions of the church-going crowd. Additionally, they were tired of hearing about how their poverty stemmed from drinking. As O'Brien went on it became clear that in his view wage earners' alienation sprung from social more than doctrinal roots. He referenced a recent gathering where workers had cheered the name of Jesus but hissed at the very mention of the church, and he recounted at length the testimony of a clerk he had interviewed, who rued: "When I go to church I see in the front pew a man who snatched the bed from under a widow, and in another pew a man



whose real estate is used for immoral purposes. If the church bore any resemblance to Jesus I would be a church-goer [sic], but it does not." Building on this last point, O'Brien jested that local churches should post the Ten Commandments in their sanctuaries so that their members might familiarize themselves with them. The Congregational Club members were not amused.



If Rogers and O'Brien had struck a nerve, it was because they were on the mark on a number of key points. It was certainly true that leading Protestants' antipathy toward the labor movement had material roots. As much as they tried to frame their opposition in intellectual terms—with reference to economic laws and sacrosanct contracts—there remained the undeniable fact that the Anglo-

The labor movement championed economic stability for the working classes. At the turn of the twentieth century, unemployed men, such as the street sweepers shown above, often took whatever work they could find.



Labor spokesmen openly criticized prominent organizations, such as the McCormick Theological Seminary, for their dependence on the city's well-to-do. Above: The seminary's Virginia Library on Belden Avenue in 1909.

Americans who crowded into Chicago's fashionable churches maintained a veritable stranglehold on local wealth. The labor spokesmen were also accurate in painting the churches as deeply dependent upon patrician benefactors, who bankrolled major infrastructural projects. The First and Second Presbyterian churches owed their majestic buildings to the Prairie Avenue elite, while McCormick Theological Seminary owed its existence to the largesse of manufacturing tycoon Cyrus H. McCormick, for whom it was named. The well-to-do also underwrote the churches' day-to-day operations. Pew rents were a crucial dimension of nineteenth-century ecclesial financing; bidding wars for the best seats ran easily into the hundreds of dollars. Such ample contributions facilitated a lavish lifestyle for Chicago's most in-demand preachers. Over the course of his nineteen-year tenure at the Central Church, the Reverend David Swing commanded an average yearly salary of nine thousand dollars, roughly twenty times the average American income during this era. Surely Rogers and O'Brien were right to insist that such monies came with strings attached.

If they did not make friends at the Congregational Club meeting, Rogers and O'Brien at least earned some notoriety. As far away as New York City the editor of the *Christian Intelligencer*, a Dutch Reformed weekly, sneered that their accusations amounted to "the fruit of ignorance and thoughtlessness." Closer to home, the Presbyterian *Interior* issued a withering retort: "According to labor," an anonymous editorialist observed, "the Christianity of Christendom is not the Christianity of Christ." He went on, "Labor does not know what it is talking about." Rogers and O'Brien fundamentally misunderstood Jesus's identity and mission, the writer argued. "The Carpenter of Nazareth" had not come to bring "safety from poverty" but rather "salvation from sin." The kingdom of which Jesus spoke "is not material but spiritual, not bread and meat but righteousness and peace and joy in the Spirit." For evidence one need look no further than the fact that "Christ found himself environed by economic and political and social conditions infinitely worse than those that beset labor at the end of the nineteenth Christian century" yet "never said a word

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EDITORIAL TOPICS.

THE CHURCH AND LABOR.

LABOR is less anxious to learn how to lay up treasures in heaven than to know how to get bread upon earth. In these words a recognized leader of labor lately made open acknowledgement of its desire. They give the gist of the vital error at the heart of its whole contention. Labor asserts that Jesus denounced wealth and that if he were here to-day he would incur the cold disdain of the church. Labor avers, also, that the church gives no evidence of genuine sympathy with the labor-movement, that no preachers proclaim to wealthy pew-holders the difficulties against rich men entering heaven, and that no minister denounces the process that permits Carnegies and Rockfellers to absorb countless millions. In short, according to labor, the Christianity of Christendom is not the Christianity of Christ.

The reply to these assertions is as simple as true: Labor does not know what it is talking about. It is ignorant of the career and method and purpose of Jesus. It ignores or is unacquainted with the nature and objects of the church, and with the historic facts that prove the church to be the truest friend labor has ever had. Ministers and professors of theology who ought to know better are so unbalanced by their brotherly and Christian interest in sociology that they warp the thought of Christ's kingdom out of its natural meaning and historic relations.

Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost. He preached the kingdom of God or heaven, but he taught that this kingdom is within ourselves. It is not material but spiritual, not bread and meat but righteousness and peace and joy in the Spirit. He affirms that the condition for citizenship in the divine kingdom is repentance. This involves turning one's back upon the kingdom of this world. Labor shows no sign of acquaintance with this purpose of the carpenter of Nazareth. It has no sense of sin. It is keenly conscious of material misery, but its desire is not salvation from sin but safety from poverty. It is therefore lacking in the historic and scientific spirit on which it prides itself (to say nothing of philosophic insight) when it thus overlooks historic actualities and essential elements in human nature. It is equally at fault in its misunderstanding of the method of Jesus. The Christ found himself environed by economic and political and social conditions infinitely worse than those that beset labor at the end of the nineteenth Christian century. Yet he never said a word against institutions or material conditions. He warned rich men against the dangers of wealth, but he said not one word against wealth itself. He saw Palestine ground by a system of taxation to which our modern monopolies are light as air; yet he commanded his followers to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. As far as he denounced any social class at all, he denounced only a church-caste, and that solely on moral and spiritual grounds. Jesus dealt with individuals, not with masses; not so much with man as with the man first, then another, and so on till he had

actual and possible, and for this reason some are greatly puzzled and others take the statement seriously. For hours throughout the country a highly excited state of feeling prevailed, while opposition leaders who were addressing public meetings on the evening the rumor was published seemed to take it for granted, and urged their hearers to prepare for a general election in the immediate future. Both Mr. A. J. Balfour and the Duke of Norfolk publicly took this view of the case. It seems strange, however, that an anti-Gladstonian journal and pronounced political opponents should be the exclusive depositories of so important a secret, for at the time it was unknown to the Premier's colleagues. Lord Rosebery, Campbell Bannerman and Mr. Gladstone's private secretary were entirely ignorant of their chief's intention to retire from public life and were as much astonished at its announcement as were people generally. Mr. Campbell Bannerman, Secretary of State for war, in a speech delivered the same evening in a Scottish town, characterized the rumor as a specimen of the "unexampled indecency of the opposition, who reckoned upon breaking down the health and powers of the Prime Minister and driving him to retirement." Questions in due time elicited a message from Biarritz which though still leaving room for conjecture, contradicted the rumor which had caused so much excitement. Sir Algernon West, Mr. Gladstone's fellow sojourner at the fashionable seaside resort in the south of France, begins his dispatch by saying that "the statement that Mr. Gladstone has definitely decided, or decided at all to resign, is untrue." The rest of the message bears clear trace of having been touched up by the old parliamentary hand. He is a master at mystification. Much is left for the speculative ingenuity of friend and foe. Elaborate superstructures of airy political conjecture are being reared by gifted speculators in future events. Some profess to see in the ambiguities of Gladstone's authorized answer a confirmation of their theory that war is likely to break out soon, and that the veteran premier is about to seek the shelter of retirement while the mutterings of the coming storm are yet faint and far off. His health is said to be excellent, and after the brief respite from care, and listening to the old but ever new cadence of the many sounding sea, Mr. Gladstone will no doubt be in his place when the approaching parliamentary session begins.

The monotonous character of the Brazilian conflict has been relieved by the decisive action of the United States admiral in command of the American fleet in Brazilian waters. Several United States merchantmen were in the bay and their captains desired to move up to the wharves. This did not accord with the purposes of the admiral commanding the insurgent ships. The trading vessels were

In this issue of the Interior, a Presbyterian publication, the editors denounced the labor church movement as lacking a fundamental understanding of Christianity.

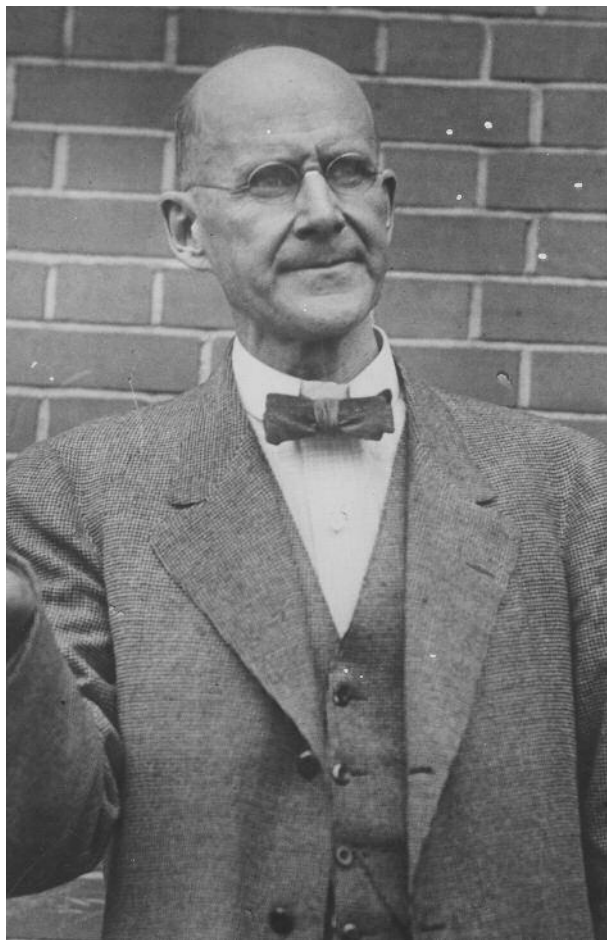
against institutional or material conditions.” Driving to the heart of the matter, he continued, “[Christ] warned rich men against the dangers of wealth, but he said not one word against wealth itself.” If “modern thinkers, Christian and sociological” were to take this example seriously, the writer concluded, “[they] may well ask themselves whether they are right and wise in demanding that the church champion any economic scheme and broach projects for remaking society.” So went the theological argument in defense of the economic status quo.

The anonymous exponent was almost certainly William Cunningham Gray, who had been the driving editorial force behind the *Interior* ever since the Great Fire. The sixty-four-year-old Ohio native had studied law before making his way into journalism and was one of the few laymen of the period to exercise exclusive editorial control over a leading Protestant paper. He excelled at the job. Over the course of his twenty-three-year tenure, the *Interior* had grown from a locally circulated, financially insolvent weekly to the most widely read Presbyterian

periodical in the nation. Gray’s editorial savvy helped spark this turnaround, as his substantial coverage of current events and staunch support of evangelical causes won the hearts of a wider Protestant public. But equally transformative was the financial backing of McCormick, who poured tens of thousands of dollars into the *Interior* after purchasing it in 1873. The industrialist’s investment would have seriously constrained Gray’s ability to champion labor had Gray been so inclined. He was not. In fact, Gray’s own loyalties to the financial elite ran as thick as blood: in 1879 his only daughter, Anna, had married Charles A. Purcell, a prominent member of the Chicago Board of Trade. Little wonder, then, that the *Interior* had no patience for labor’s critique. But nor would it have the last word.

A week later, Rogers returned Gray’s volley in the pages of the *Railway Times*, the new beacon of Eugene V. Debs’s fledgling American Railway Union. Rogers had already discussed the Congregational Club meeting at length in the paper’s February 1 edition, recounting in rich detail the “viands” and “diamond shirt studs” that belied the church’s purported sympathy for the laboring poor. Now, in the wake of the *Interior*’s salvo, he fired back, writing, “The soul of its article is that Jesus tolerated the extremely rich and insufferably poor, so the Church has no right to meddle with fixed institutions. It says the foe of Labor is Labor itself, and flaunts the old insult and falsehood that drinking is the cause of Labor’s misfortune.” Indignant, he asked, “Why does the Church do this?” and answered, “Because it instinctively feels the shame of its silence on the wrongs of Labor and hastens to throw the responsibility upon an alleged fault of the workingmen.” It was this view of the churches—as both corrupted by and complicit in economic injustice—that led Rogers and other working-class believers to the conclusion that it was time to strike out on their own.

On the afternoon of Sunday, February 11, 1894, with the temperature in the twenties, a variety of freethinkers, trade unionists, and curiosity seekers—not to mention four choirboys from the Moody Bible Institute—headed toward Bricklayers’ Hall, traversing along the way the streets of the rapidly evolving West Side. In the years leading up to the Great Fire, many of the city’s well-to-do had flocked to the area bounded by the Chicago River on the east and Ogden Avenue on the west, Randolph Street on the north and Congress Boulevard on the south. Stretching across the northern section of this fashionable district, Washington Boulevard became during these years home to some of Chicago’s most upscale churches, including the Episcopal Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul (1861) at Peoria Street, First Congregational (1870) at Ann Street (now Racine Avenue), and Union Park Congregational (1871) at Ashland Avenue. But as early as the mid-1880s, with the

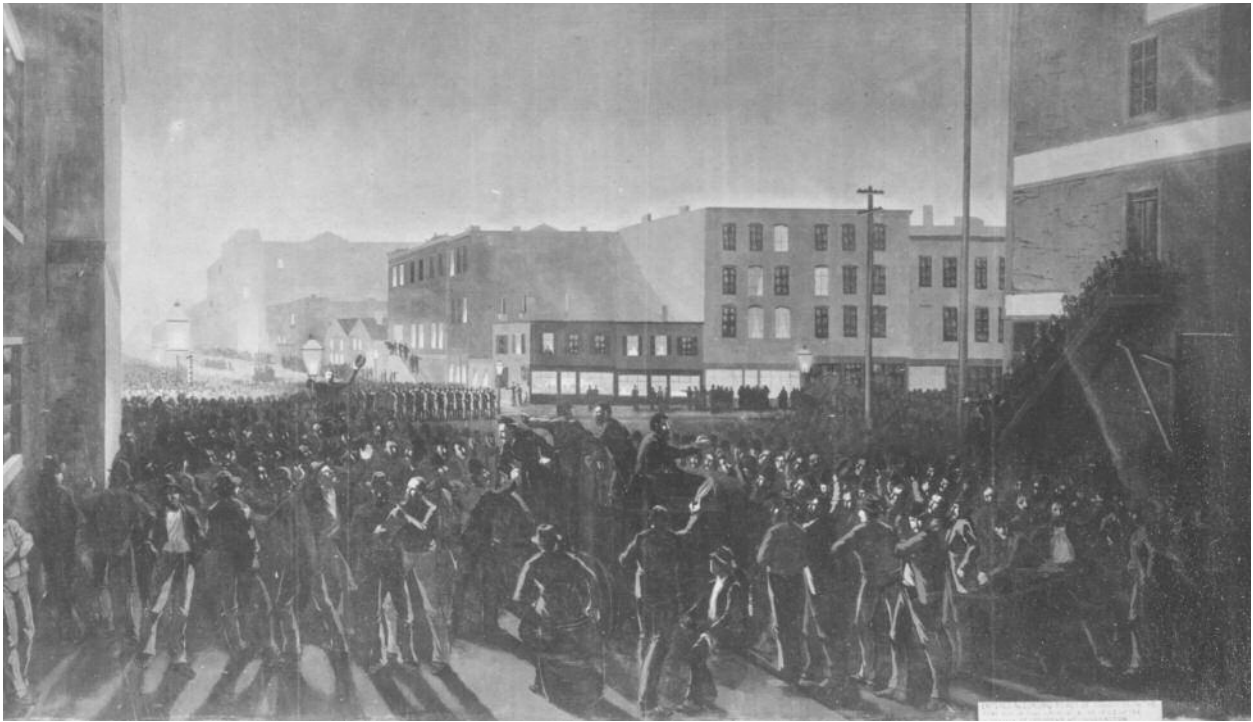


Eugene Debs (pictured in May 1920) founded the American Railway Union and later the International Labor Union.



Bricklayers' Hall on the 900 block of West Monroe Street (above, 1930) served as a meeting place for pro-labor groups, including the Modern Church. The setting contrasts with that of the First Congregational Church in Union Park (below, 1911).





Labor unrest exploded in May 1886 at Haymarket Square (above, in a print of a contemporary painting). At the time, Hull-House (right) was one of the few safety nets for workers, many of whom were poor immigrants who had only recently come to the United States.

city's strapping industrial core bursting through the seams of the Loop, single-family homes began to give way to sprawling warehouses and factories. By the time the bomb exploded on May 4, 1886, in the West Side's Haymarket Square, it was clear that the district's future belonged not to the landed aristocracy but to the working poor—the Germans, Bohemians, Irish, and Eastern European Jews who increasingly called it home.

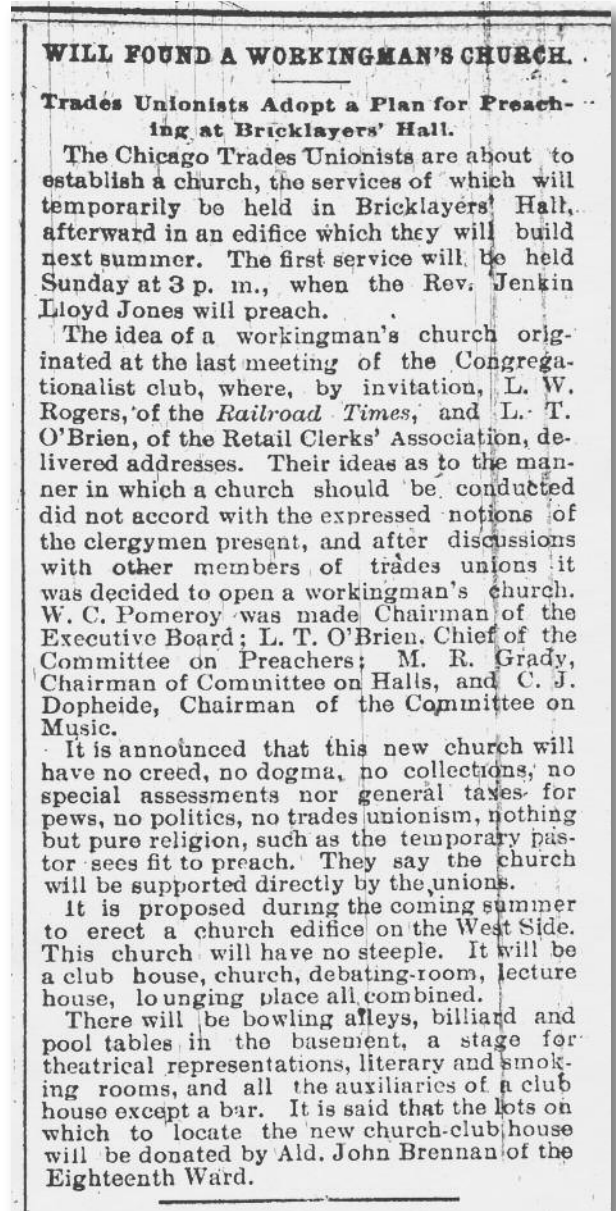
Bricklayers' Hall showcased the fruits of their labors. Completed in 1889, the same year Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr commenced their settlement house work, the three-story brick structure sat at the corner of Peoria and Monroe streets, roughly a mile due north of Hull-House. The building's fifty-thousand-dollar price tag—approximately \$1.18 million today—testified to the rising power of the city's construction trades. So did its magnificent cupola and impressive third-floor auditorium outfitted with lofty ceilings, fine woodwork, and seats for eight hundred persons; in the *Chicago Tribune's* estimation, the auditorium seemed “finer than any of its kind in the country.” The city's Trade and Labor Assembly held its meetings there every other week on Sundays, but this wintry February afternoon happened to fall on an off week.



Those who braved the elements had come, instead, for the first-ever service of the Modern Church—a church by and for Chicago’s working classes. The impetus for this new organization sprung from the question-and-answer session following Rogers’s and O’Brien’s speeches to the Congregational Club. Among those in the audience was William Rainey Harper, the young president of the University of Chicago, who by that point in the program had heard quite enough. Turning dourly to Rogers and O’Brien, he asked, “Why not found a church of your own?” Following several weeks of intense conversation and planning with other working-class leaders, they were prepared to call his bluff. The new organization broke with the customs of the Protestant establishment on several key points: it was to be entirely funded by the TLA, with no weekly collection or auctioning of pews; its executive board was to be chaired not by an attorney or financier but instead by William C. Pomeroy, the TLA’s vice president; and it would have no set creed, serving instead as a platform from which practitioners of all different traditions could proclaim the truths of “pure religion.” In these ways Chicago’s trade unionists sought to spring Christ from the corrupting confines of the contemporary church.

They were not the first to try. A Unitarian minister by the name of John Trevor had founded the inaugural labor church in Manchester, England, in 1891; within three years there were at least twenty-four sprinkled throughout the industrializing cities of Great Britain. Meanwhile, the movement was gaining steam on the other side of the Atlantic. In 1892 William Dwight Porter Bliss, an Episcopal priest, founded the Church of the Carpenter in Boston as “an effort to carry out, in church life, the principles of Christian Socialism.” Bliss’s ministry resonated with an upstart twenty-five-year-old minister named Herbert N. Casson, who had become disillusioned with the Methodist Church’s lack of outreach to the working classes and left the denomination. In 1894 in Lynn, Massachusetts, Casson founded the Labor Church, which like its Chicago counterpart spurned the weekly collection and carried to wage earners, proclaiming “the more unfortunate a man is, the warmer will be his welcome.” There was, however, at least one major distinction between these efforts and the Modern Church: it emerged not from the mind of a sympathetic cleric but from the initiative of labor itself.

The inaugural service was a smashing success. The audience at Bricklayers’ Hall, which included representatives from all of Chicago’s leading trade unions, heard a sermon from Jenkin Lloyd Jones, organizing spirit of the previous year’s World’s Parliament of Religions and pastor of All Souls’ Unitarian Church. Jones’s usual parish sat a few blocks northeast of Michigan Avenue’s 3400 block—known to locals as the “Avenue of



The founding of a labor church, described here in an 1894 newspaper article, was not without controversy. Most members of the Congregational Club did not agree with the principles set forth by the guest speakers—L. W. Rogers of the Railroad Times and L. T. O'Brien of the Retail Clerks' Association—at their January meeting.

LABOR CHURCH OPENS.

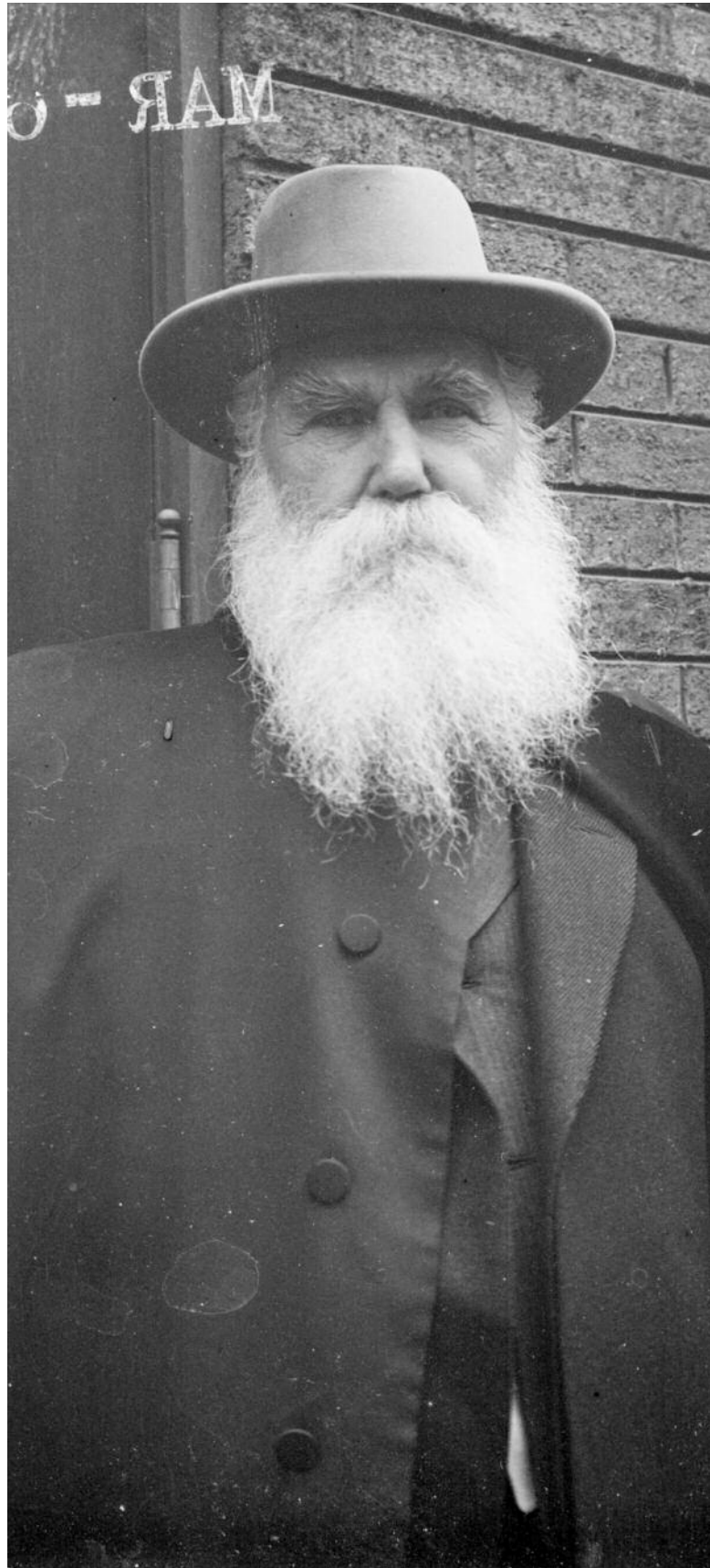
AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING OF THE MODERN ECCLESIASTICAL IDEA.

A. T. O'Brien of the Retail Clerks' Union Opens the Exercises in Bricklayers' Hall and the Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones Preaches—Church and Club House in One—Meetings Every Other Sunday for the Present—Speakers to Be from All Denominations.

"The Modern Church," the new organization of the trades unionists, held its first service yesterday afternoon at Bricklayers' Hall. The sermon was delivered by the Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones of All Souls' Unitarian Church. The singing was led by a double male quartet from the Moody Institute.

The drollest feature of the unique exercises was the vigorous protest made at the close of the proceedings by the young men singers from the Moody Institute, in which they voiced their vexation because they had inadvertently sang to the preaching of a Unitarian clergyman, and what was worse they had sung gospel melodies which had been "Unitarianized"; modernized the Unitarians call it, and "heterodoxized" the young men singers term it. The song books used were small ones entitled "Songs for the Sunday Circle." The songs, old familiar ones many of them, had been changed, the double quartet said, so as to conform to the Unitarian ideas. The songs included such as "Onward, Christian Soldier," "Nearer, My God, to Thee," and many new ones which have been written since some of the congregation had seen the inside of a church. The double quartet sang first on the sidewalk old hymns from memory. This to attract street promenaders, but the songs inside the hall were all from these small books, which had been scattered through the hail.

The congregation was a mixed one, composed largely of curiosity seekers. Many prominent persons, known as independent thinkers in matters of religion, sat in the crowded hall. All the leading labor unions of the city were represented.



The Modern Church received attention from the popular press in 1894 (above and far right). Mainstream printed media often noted the conflict between it and the established Chicago churches.



CHURCH AS AN ISSUE.

IT IS DISCUSSED BY A LABOR LEADER
AND A PREACHER.

W. C. Pomeroy and the Rev. William A. Burch Meet in Joint Debate at Bricklayers' Hall—Address of Welcome Delivered by the Former to the Recent Convention of the Federation of Labor the Basis of the Discussion—Stead Presides and Makes His Farewell Speech.

Bricklayers' Hall was the scene yesterday afternoon of an occasion as significant as it was unique. It was the second meeting of the newly-organized "Modern Church," the most recent outgrowth of trades unionism in this city. The Christian Church and labor met through their representatives and exchanged views—chiefly those which each holds concerning the other. The Rev. William A. Burch of the Hamlin Avenue M. E. Church appeared as a champion of the cause of the church, while W. C. Pomeroy, Vice-President of the Trade and Labor Assembly, appeared on the side of labor. W. T. Stead presided.

Mansions"—and at first it appeared he had not recalibrated his message. His exhortation to "welcome to your reading and thinking the lives and thoughts of Lincoln, Newton, Agassiz, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Bryant" would have fared better with the well-heeled residents of the South Side. But when he proclaimed, "You can build a church where the millionaire and tramp may worship together," he was greeted by rousing cheers; and as he unleashed several more applause-worthy lines in succession, the audience forgave his awkward start. Indeed, about the only people dismayed by the meeting's end were the four Moody choirboys, who felt they had been hoodwinked into singing Unitarian hymns.

The reactions of the press were mixed. While the *Railway Times* gushed that the Modern Church would be a bellwether for labor-church relations, the German-language socialist paper *Die Fackel* observed dubiously that it "will come up against many that believe there is absolutely no need for it." These contrasting responses reflected the fractures within Chicago's working classes. As much as those in the TLA might welcome the advent of a workingmen's church, it had little appeal to the Catholics and freethinkers who comprised the base of the Central Labor Union. The leading Protestant papers were also predictably negative. Responding to the news of the church's founding, the Congregationalist *Advance* opined, "[the members] will very quickly develop more sympathy with the other churches in their attempts to overcome the imperfections so freely criticized."

Despite its vocal detractors, the Modern Church continued to build on its auspicious start. On February 25, nearly a thousand people came to watch Pomeroy debate local Methodist preacher William A. Burch. The topic: Pomeroy's recent address at an American Federation of Labor convention in which he roasted "the church which has strayed from the paths marked out for it by its twelve immortal walking delegates, under the supervision of the Grand Master Mechanic of the universe." William T. Stead, a muckraking English journalist, moderated the debate. His support for labor and notorious flair for the dramatic made him, for the TLA at least, a natural choice. Just two months previously, in a speech before the Women's Club, Stead had accused the city's elite matrons of being "more disreputable than the worst harlot."

Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones, pictured at left with his wife in 1916, was a key supporter of the Modern Church. He spoke at the church's inaugural service and was one of few ordained clergy to openly endorse the ideals of the movement.



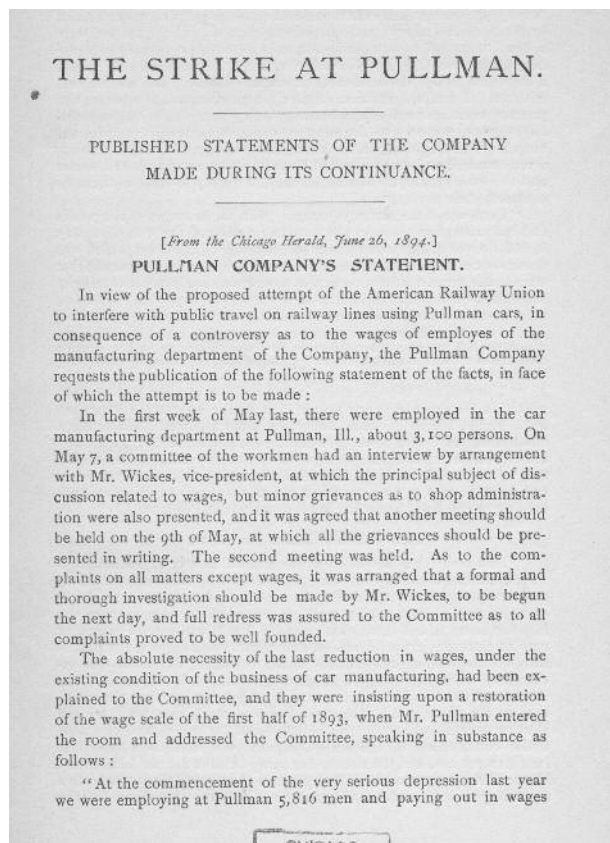
Professor Graham Taylor (above, 1909) spoke at the last recorded meeting of the Modern Church on March 11, 1894.

Reveling in the charged atmosphere inside Bricklayers' Hall, Stead set the proceedings in motion. Reverend Burch declared at the outset his sympathy for laboring people. Much to the audience's chagrin, however, he went on to denounce wage earners' "hostile attitude" toward the church as "a fearful mistake." Pomeroy, meanwhile, relished the home-crowd advantage, quipping, "In order to get good out of wheat we thrash it. In order to get good out of the Church we must thrash it." The *Tribune* characterized the conversation as "bold, honest, and at times almost bitter." The *Advance* resented the bitterness. Reprimanding all those who would "kick and cuff the church up and down all the streets," it declared, "It is all fun for the critics. But it is about as unlike Christianity, in whose name it indulges itself, as anything could well be."

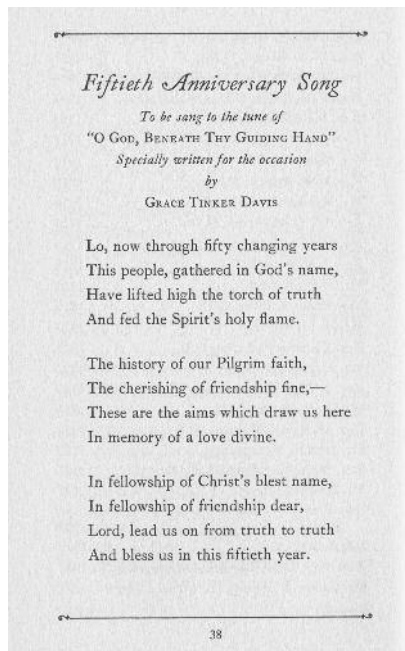
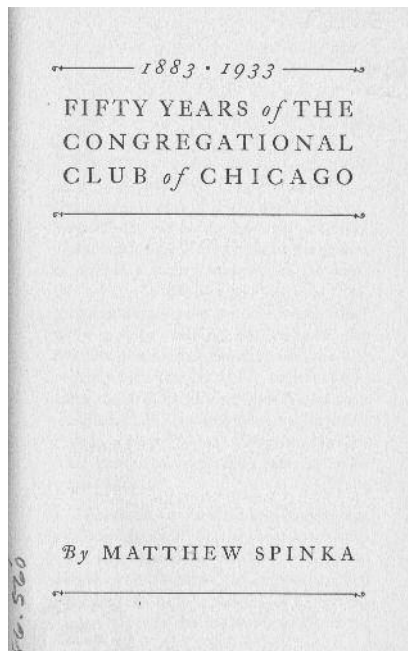
Those who sympathized with the *Advance* could take heart: this trade-union church did not last. In fact, all traces of the organization disappear from the historical record within a month of its founding. On March 11, during its last recorded gathering, social reformer Graham Taylor lectured on "society" and L. T. O'Brien announced a new Sunday-school program geared toward inculcating trade-union principles in children. The church may have met several more times or not at all, but either way its lifespan was short and in this way representative. Labor churches rarely survived more than a year. In most cases this was because, lacking the support of greater institutions, they depended heavily upon the time and talents of

a charismatic leader. When sickness, weariness, or the allure of other opportunities drew the founder away, the organization floundered. Casson's congregation in Massachusetts survived for six years—an exceptional tenure to be sure—but, in keeping with the trend, his resignation in 1900 hastened the church's decline.

The abrupt demise of Chicago's Modern Church's had less to do with overdependence on a single individual, however, than with the deteriorating industrial situation. As winter turned into spring and there remained no end in sight to the working classes' deprivation, unrest mounted across the nation. By March 1894 "industrial armies"—ragged bands of the unemployed—were tramping across the countryside, and then in April, 180,000 bituminous coal miners across five states laid down their picks, demanding that their wages be restored to pre-Panic levels. During these same months, Chicago convulsed, as nearly two dozen strikes erupted in industries ranging from upholstery to canal digging, iron molding to cloak cutting. Most disruptive of all was the brawl between the Central Building League and the Building Trades Council, which prompted bricklayers,



Labor unrest facilitated the abrupt end of the Modern Church. In the aftermath of the 1894 strike at the Pullman Palace Car Company, the company issued this formal statement.



In contrast to the Modern Church, the Congregational Club sustained itself for decades. This booklet commemorates the club's first fifty years.

carpenters, plasterers, gas fitters, plumbers, painters, hoisting engineers, tile layers, and roofers to leave their posts. The widening scope of these conflicts stretched the TLA's resources to a breaking point; and the bitter conclusion to the strike and boycott against the Pullman Palace Car Company, which began in May and extended through the summer, left the city's working classes only more depleted. By autumn, when the dust began to settle, the TLA lacked the will to resurrect its church.

Despite its short life span, the Modern Church sheds light on an enduring and often-overlooked dimension of working-class life in late-nineteenth-century Chicago. To be sure, many wage earners despised the city's religious establishment. But some who had been raised within the Protestant tradition found ongoing inspiration in the life of Jesus, a carpenter, and the words of the gospels, which avowed that "he has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly" (Luke 1:52); and moreover, that "the laborer is worthy of his hire" (Matthew 10:10). During an era in which the Protestant churches often marched in lockstep with the captains of industry, these working-class believers cultivated a dissenting faith that emboldened them in their fight against the likes of Rockefeller, Pullman, and Gould. Viewed in this wider lens, the tragic irony is that the native-born men who were the most powerful stewards of this tradition serially flouted its leveling implications, barring women, immigrants, and African Americans from full partnership in industrial battles. But however fraught with contradictions, the story of labor's struggle against Gilded Age Christianities compromised by wealth remains poignant still in the twenty-first century.

Heath W. Carter is a PhD candidate in United States history at the University of Notre Dame and in 2011–12 will be a Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellow. His dissertation is entitled "Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago."

ILLUSTRATIONS | All illustrations are from the Chicago History Museum. 4, DN-0071321; 5, DN-0053478; 6, top: i63017, left: i63016; 7, left: i63022, right: i63023, bottom: i63021, 8–9, i03914; 10, DN-0055283; 11, i62566, inset: i62567; 12, i63020; 13, top: i26197 (detail), bottom: DN-0008981; 14, top: i03659aa, right: i01542 (detail); 15, *Chicago Tribune*, February 9, 1894; 16, *Chicago Tribune*, February 12, 1894; 16–17, DN-0065869; 17, *Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 1894; 18, top: DN-0007479 (detail), bottom: i62911; 19, right: i63018, left: i63019.

FOR FURTHER READING | William T. Stead's impassioned *If Christ Came to Chicago* (Chicago: Laird and Lee, 1894) remains an important contemporary text, and is widely available online. Modern treatments include Jackson Lears' *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1870–1920* (New York: Harper, 2009), and Eric L. Hirsch's *Urban Revolt: Ethnic Politics in the Nineteenth-Century Chicago Labor Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Rima Lunin Schultz's *The Church and the City: A Social History of 150 Years at Saint James, Chicago* (Chicago: The Cathedral of Saint James, 1986) discusses the upper-class church in Chicago, while Charles Howard Hopkins's *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865–1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940) provides an introduction to its eponymous subject.