

1-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Ann C. Hodges, *A Lawyer's Journey of Worker Advocacy and Faith*, 19 RICH. J.L. & PUB. INT. 325 (2015).

Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/pilr/vol19/iss4/7>

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A LAWYER'S JOURNEY OF WORKER ADVOCACY AND
FAITH

*By: Ann C. Hodges**

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I was lucky. Although no one in my family was a lawyer, I was exposed to principles of social justice at an early age. I was raised in the South during the Civil Rights struggles for integration of schools and workplaces. While I cannot claim to have been an activist in that struggle, I observed it as an impressionable child and youth and was inspired by the courage of those active in the movement.

I was also raised in the United Methodist Church in a family of deep and abiding faith. My parents were active in the church and our attendance as children was compulsory. What appealed to me most as I learned about Christianity was the relational aspects of faith. Christians are a community. We are charged with caring for one another, and indeed, for all others. We must love our neighbors, not just those close to us but everyone with whom we come in contact, including those who are very different from ourselves.¹ We have a duty to care for “the least of these,” the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned.² Much is expected from those of us who have been given much.³

Although my family was comfortably middle class, I heard my father’s stories of growing up in poverty during the Depression with parents who dropped out of school in their early teens to work. He also had to drop out of high school and work to help his family, but returned to graduate at age 20 and then worked his way through college with no family financial support. From a young age I learned the value of hard work, the struggles of those who start life without a financial cushion, and the commitment of working people.

I found these principles of social justice sustaining but before long, the church and its members disappointed me. The values I learned there were not lived out by many of the members of the church and even many of its pastors. While there were some courageous supporters of the Civil Rights movement, I saw too many professed Christians who were decidedly unchristian toward their African-American brothers and sisters who were fighting for basic rights like jobs, equal education, and voting. My affiliation with the church went into a long hiatus.

As I left the church I discovered a new vehicle for the pursuit of social justice. I became a labor advocate, a career I discovered completely by accident. My journey began with thumbing through my college catalog, a hefty print book at the time, looking for a major. I stumbled upon a description of the Industrial Relations program. A lifelong southerner, I had

¹ *Matthew 22:38; Luke 10:29–37.*

² *Matthew 25:40.*

³ *Luke 12:48.*

no idea what Industrial Relations was. Indeed, I would love to know the story of how a large public university in the least unionized state in the country ended up with such a major.⁴ Despite my complete lack of knowledge, the courses in this interdisciplinary major looked interesting – business and social science, two of my favorites. So a woefully ignorant Industrial Relations major I became.

As I learned more about the subject, I initially thought I would become a human resources manager who managed and motivated employees to do their best. I spent college summers working for a mortgage banking company where I saw both good and bad managers. Then I took a course in collective bargaining, where we simulated labor negotiations, and I was hooked. I had discovered the fascinating world of labor-management relations and I couldn't get enough of the subject. Our career advisers told the few female industrial relations majors that we should become secretaries in personnel departments and try to work our way into professional jobs in personnel management. Instead I decided to go to graduate school in Industrial Relations. As I gained greater exposure to the labor movement, I became increasingly interested in labor unions as a vehicle for worker empowerment. What appealed to me was the communitarian and relational aspects of unions. Unions were groups of people who joined together for the common good of all. The members supported one another, even when it meant some self-sacrifice. Together they were powerful. Together they could bring about change.

I remember quite clearly the moment I knew that one day I would be a union advocate. In the summer between college and graduate school I was fortunate to get a paid summer internship with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the agency that administers the law that protects the rights of employees to join together for the common good. Lucky again, I applied at a time when the agency was trying to increase the number of women employed in professional positions. In mid-summer, I was conducting an election for union representation among a group of laborers. As I recall, we were outside on a hilltop in Indiana waiting for the union representative to arrive. The company representative was already present, a young white man dressed in a pricey suit who arrived in an expensive late model car. The union representative drove up in a well-used, much earlier model car. He was an older African-American man dressed in regular clothes. The contrast was visually striking. It was clear where the money was, and most likely then, the power. I realized at that moment that I wanted to fight for workers' rights. I wanted to help workers to join together

⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, the major has now been folded into the Sociology Department and I wonder if the program continues to ignite the same passion that it did in me.

and pool their resources to level the playing field with employers. I wanted to work with those seeking fair pay and working conditions in order to support themselves and their families.

As a labor advocate, I could do work consistent with my values, fighting for the rights of all working men and women to good jobs, nondiscrimination, fair pay, and most importantly, to join together in supportive communities to advocate for themselves. First with the NLRB and then as a lawyer representing unions and working people, I found a career that enabled me to do relational work, to care for my fellow human beings, and to use my skills to work along with them, not for them. The labor community embodied many of the same values as the faith community. We joined together to care for and support one another and to work together for positive change benefiting all.

During my work as a labor advocate I have had many wonderful mentors, but one that stands out, Irv Friedman,⁵ taught me that practicing law and fighting for people's rights could be done with gentleness. Irv, one of the most skilled lawyers I ever saw, practiced law for over 50 years, earning the respect of everyone with whom he came into contact. While he represented unions and workers, he was unfailingly kind and gracious to everyone on the opposite side of his cases without ever sacrificing the interests of his clients. He taught me that one could advocate without rancor even in the highly charged arena of labor relations, making lawyering more consistent with relational values.

I also learned much from the men and women who were my clients. They were smart, hardworking, and dedicated, with boundless energy. Many worked a full-time job and did union work in addition, not to mention taking care of homes and families. They were empowered by participating in the labor movement and worked to empower others to ensure that all workers had good, safe jobs. With a level playing field, they could negotiate effectively with employers to reach agreements that allowed the workers produce top quality goods and services while earning a good living, enabling the employer to operate a profitable business.

As a law professor, I have tried to convey to my students what I have learned over my years of labor advocacy and law practice. Cases are about people and people matter. Our jobs as lawyers are to resolve disputes and to fight for our clients' legal rights. We can do that with caring and kindness, treating others as we want to be treated. We have been given much. We must give back. We must advocate with those who need us. For me,

⁵ Katz Friedman, *Irving M. Friedman, Founding Partner*, <http://www.kfeej.com/irving-m-friedman/> (last visited May 20, 2016).

that is workers. And we must use our skills to empower them, not to disempower them.

Workers are my priority because our work defines us. All workers, regardless of their jobs, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect and paid a living wage sufficient to enable them to care for themselves and their families. They deserve to spend their work days free of discrimination and harassment. And each day they deserve to go home to their families as safe, sound and healthy as when they left. To accomplish this workers must have the enforceable legal right to join together as a community. It is for that right, most of all, that I fight.

Along with continued advocacy for workers, working with students to help them find and fuel their own passion, has brought me great joy. And to see those students go out into the community and engage in relational work brings even greater joy. So many students have educated and even surpassed the teacher. Whether they advocate with workers or others who have less power in our society or represent management where they advise fair treatment of workers, they advance the cause of social justice.

My own journey came full circle when I was visiting a local United Methodist church with a friend. There on the blackboard in the Sunday School class was a quote from the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church. It said, "We support the right of all public and private employees and employers to organize for collective bargaining into unions and other groups of their own choosing. Further, we support the right of both parties to protection in so doing"⁶ And there it was. Perhaps I belonged in this church I left so long ago after all. The common values that I saw between labor unions and faith communities were real.

I have since reconnected with the United Methodist Church, becoming an active member. The church is not perfect, nor are the people in it. Today the Methodist Church struggles with the issue of sexual orientation. But I work for justice within the church, not from the outside. Unions are not perfect either after all. Both are composed of people, with all of our flaws and foibles. But if we work together, as a community, caring for one another despite our differences, I am confident that we will make progress toward a more just society for all.

⁶ UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, BOOK OF DISCIPLINE §163(B).

