

**In Pursuit of Justice: So Far, So Good: The first 50 years of the Christian Labour Association of Canada, 1952-2002.** by Ed Grootenboer.  
Christian Labour Association of Canada, Mississauga, Ontario. Hardcover, 162 pp.  
Reviewed by Johan D.Tangelder.

In the early 1950s Canada's labour scene was chaotic. Christian workers found themselves at the mercy of organizations led by non-Christians imbued with a non-Christian view of life.

Strikes, lockouts, violence, and corruption were all too common. Secular trade unions were steeped in the tradition of the "adversary system," which holds that management and labour are engaged in continuous warfare. Unions and employers had little respect for the dignity and wishes of workers or tolerance for different points of view. In a diluted form, this class struggle mentality occupies a prominent place in labour-management relations until this day. Workers with a Christian worldview wanted a better way for labour relations. They founded a new union, the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), which still stands out as radical alternative to the secular trade unions.

The CLAC's philosophy is reconciliation rather than confrontation. It wants more for its members. It wants an equal partnership with management on behalf of its members and a cooperative labour relations environment. Although on rare occasions, strikes cannot always be avoided. Ed VanderKloet, the very effective CLAC representative both in the field-work and as the Executive Director from 1972 to 1989 and editor of *The Guide* until 1992, CLAC's official publication, explained that the Christian Labour movement aims at two things: first the recognition of the worker as God's image bearer; and second, cooperation in industry. He also pointed out that anyone who takes his or her Christian faith seriously knows the tensions that arise between principle and practice. He also stated that taking a profit in business is not wrong.

In *Pursuit of Justice* Grootenboer tells the fascinating story of long years of tireless efforts and courageous efforts to establish a Christian labour union. He tells it with honesty and humility. He not only mentions the successes, but also the mistakes, failures, and the strong personality clashes. He also testifies to God's faithfulness in the midst of adversity. Almost from the beginning, the CLAC had its share of battles, internal and external. The internal ones were mainly over how to achieve the organization's aims. That friction led to a bitter division for a period of time. The external battles led to boisterous and often intense opposition from Canada's trade union establishment throughout CLAC's 50 years of existence and continuing to today. Grootenboer rightly points out that the founding of the CLAC involved not only those who played leadership roles but also to the many thousands of dedicated and active members. He also gives an account of the members' faith commitment, sacrifices of time and finances, failures and successes, court cases, constant struggles with secular unions and their unfair tactics.

From the beginning the CLAC was blessed with dedicated and visionary leaders. Those who depended on the union for their livelihood did not profit from it. Salary increases were well below a rising cost of living and some times had to be put off or cancelled to make ends meet. In his book *In and Around the Workplace* Ed Vanderkloet described Christian

leadership as entrusting others with responsibility, respecting their feelings, providing encouragement and being honest with people, also when criticism is appropriate. He challenged both labour and management to leave behind the "zero-sum" game of adversarial policies, and to seek to infuse the work place with the trust and respect that follow from the mutual recognition of a common task.

Over the years CLAC earned a lot of respect. And while secular unions are dwindling in numbers and influence, the CLAC enjoys a steady growth. Other than going non-union, disgruntled Canadian Labour Congress union members have very few options outside the CLAC. Since the CLAC believes in the principle of trade union plurality, it was never out to eliminate a competing union. It seeks not only to create a place for itself but also to defend the rights of other unions to exist and function. Its focus has been on organizing non-union workers. In many cases, other unions could not or did not want to organize these workers, for one reason or another.

I am grateful for the existence of the CLAC. Its efforts are the salt and light in the world of labour. It demonstrates how Christians can be heard in the public square. Grootenboer notes that "the loss of influence of the Christian world and life has most serious consequences. Historically, Christian principles have served a vital role in establishing and maintaining freedom in societies and its institutions, including trade unions."

Therefore, Grootenboer rightly reminds churches to support a Christian organization such as CLAC in their thoughts, prayers, words and deeds. It should be nothing more than a natural extension of a life of gratitude of which our Reformed confessions speak, to encourage each other to support a strong Christian presence in the field of labour and labour relations. I hope that Grootenboer's book will be widely read. It challenges us to reflect anew on the meaning of the Christian world and life view in every sphere of life.

On a personal note. Reading *In Pursuit of Justice* brought back many memories. Since the early sixties I have come to know most of the CLAC leaders such as Ed Vanderkloet and Harry Antonides. I still have on file some of their letters. They were always ready to answer my questions. They were also wonderful encouragers throughout my ministry. I am sure other pastors had the same experience.

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January 2006