



CREATING A POSITIVE WORK CLIMATE

Editor's note: This article is adapted from a position paper the authors drafted in November 1999 for the formation of Ascension Health, St. Louis, by the Daughters of Charity, St. Louis, and the Sisters of St. Joseph, Nazareth, MI. Intended as a statement of the new system's philosophy, the paper has been used primarily as an educational tool for leadership groups and for the orientation of new leaders.

Ascension Health believes that it must have a competent work force committed to its mission, vision, and values as part of the Catholic health ministry. The system's human resources (HR) policies, procedures, and practices must therefore ensure that its work force is informed, involved, and instrumental in fostering a positive organizational climate. Our mutual compact with each staff member is based on the following fundamental HR beliefs and principles.

- Mutual trust, commitment, and respect
- Effective and honest communication
- Diversity
- Equal opportunity and nondiscrimination
- Participatory decision making



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Ascension Health, St. Louis, Bases Its Human Resources Policies on Church Social Teaching

**BY DANIEL O'BRIEN, PhD,
& DAVID SMITH**

- Sound orientation and clear work-performance expectations
- Fair and timely performance appraisals
- Fair and consistent supervisory practices and due process
- Competitive and just compensation
- A safe, healthy, and productive work environment
- Personal and professional growth and development
- A reasonable work/life balance

We, the people who constitute Ascension Health, represent an enormous reservoir of knowledge, skill, and dedication. Realizing this, we are challenged to be a learning organization committed to nurturing a culture that dignifies our work and continuously improves every aspect of our work and service.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

We base our HR policies and procedures on seven key ethical principles of Catholic social teaching.

Dignity of the Human Person Every human life is sacred at every stage of its development, from conception to death. Each of us is created in the "image and likeness of God," participates in God's continuing creative act, and is destined for union with God. We are spiritual as well as bodily creatures, possessing a creative intellect, will, senses, and emotions, in one integral whole. We are also inherently social beings. Every human being, regardless of race, gender, orientation, creed, or national origin, possesses an inalienable dignity and must be respected as an inherently valuable member of the human community.

The Common Good The common good embraces the sum of those conditions of social life by which individuals, families, and groups can achieve their own genuinely *human* fulfillment in a relatively



thorough and ready way. Whether it is applied to an organization, smaller groups, or to society as a whole, the common good imposes three responsibilities on those who exercise decision-making authority. They must:

- Respect each person's fundamental and inalienable rights, including the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard privacy and rightful freedom, especially in matters of religious beliefs.

- Arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests, and at the same time make accessible to each interest whatever is needed to lead a genuinely human life.

- Ensure by morally acceptable means the security of the organization, group or society, and its individual members.

Subsidiarity In any organization, as in society as a whole, decisions should be made at the most appropriate level. Individuals have a right to participate in decisions that directly affect them, in accord with their individual dignity and their responsibility to the common good. One should not withdraw decision-making authority from the individuals or smaller groups to which it belongs and assign it to a higher authority. However, a higher authority properly intervenes in decisions when necessary to secure or protect the needs and rights of all. When a decision is to be made, one should identify the most appropriate forum of responsibility for the decision and then determine how, and to what degree, those most affected should participate in the decision making.

Stewardship Responsible stewardship begins with the presumption that only God has absolute dominion over creation. Human beings are called to exercise wise stewardship over the gifts of creation, ensuring the security of future generations and of the gift of creation itself. A just health care system promotes equity of care and the good health of all in the community, recognizing that many social goods compete for society's limited resources. Responsible stewardship of resources is thus best accomplished in dialogue with people from all social circles, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity and with respect for the other moral principles that guide individuals and organizations.

Special Concern for the Poor and Vulnerable This principle is generally referred to in Catholic teaching as the "preferential option for the poor"—the "poor" including, but not limited to, those who are economically deprived. The principle is rooted in the biblical notion of justice, in which God calls us to be advocates for the voiceless and the powerless (e.g., "the widows and the orphans") and to help restore *right relationships*. People

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who are, for whatever reason, deprived or especially vulnerable have a special *moral claim* on the community (including its institutions and organizations). As a matter of both justice and charity, society should put in place structures and systems that address and meet such persons' special needs so that they may flourish more fully as human persons and participate more fully in the common good.

Health Care Is a Social Good Health is a fundamental good necessary for human flourishing. Like education, health care is a *social good* precisely because it is necessary for both individual human flourishing and the common good. It is a *service* and a *ministry* that should be accessible to all, regardless of their social or economic status. Given Catholic health care's commitment to biblical justice, human dignity, and the common good, we must work to secure poor and vulnerable people's right to health care. Health care should never be treated as a mere commodity or used primarily as a means to maximize profits or

SOURCES FOR THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING

- Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891, the first papal encyclical to address the rights of workers as its principal subject
- Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, issued on the 40th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*
- Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, issued on the 70th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*
- Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963
- "Declaration on Religious Liberty," "The Church in the Modern World," and "The Apostolate of the Laity," in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Costello Publishing, Northport, NY, 1975
- Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967
- World Synod of Bishops, *Convenientes ex Universo*, 1971
- Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 1971, issued on the 80th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*
- Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 1981, issued on the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*
- Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987
- National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, 1986
- Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, issued on and commemorating the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*
- Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995
- *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Doubleday, New York City, 1994, is a valuable resource for summaries of church social teaching as found in many of the above resources. See in particular nn. 2,288, 2,401-2,463, and 2,488-2,489



provide returns to investors.

The Dignity of Work Workers must be treated as superior to their labor. Work is a spiritual, creative activity (as well as a means of earning a living for oneself and one's family), enabling a person to contribute to society and to the common good. Work is also an opportunity to foster social solidarity and thus one of the principal ways in which people participate in the continuing act of God's creation. The workplace must be a truly *human community*, and workers should have an active role in making it so. Workers must be treated fairly, in accord with human dignity and justice. They have a right to form community. They should have routine, structured opportunities to have a voice in their work, and to participate in decisions that affect their working conditions, in accord with the principle of subsidiarity.

Justice and a Fair Wage "Justice" means giving to individuals what is *due* or *owed* them because of their human dignity and participation in the common good. For example, we owe each other care, compassion, respect, honesty, and fairness. Two notions of justice stand out in the church's social teaching:

Commutative justice refers to the keeping of agreements and contracts. Commutative justice

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requires one to honor contracts or agreements, except in cases of fraud.

Distributive justice refers to what a group (or society as a whole) owes its individual members in proportion to:

- An individual's needs, contribution, and responsibility
- The resources available (market and other financial considerations would be apropos here)
- The group's (or society's) responsibility to the common good

These are also the basic considerations for determining a fair wage at a given time and place. Commutative justice (e.g., agreements between parties) is never sufficient in itself. Remuneration for work should contribute significantly toward the worker's ability to provide a dignified livelihood for self and family on the material, social, cultural, and spiritual levels. Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for his or her life and family, and of serving the community. Because economic life inevitably brings with it competing interests, employers should follow policies that respect the needs, rights, and duties of all.

Corresponding Rights and Responsibilities People have basic rights and responsibilities because of their

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PERSONNEL RELATIONS

Editor's note: The following Ascension Health document describes the 14 principles on which the system's human resources departments base their policies. Note that Ascension calls its employees "associates."

Promoting the Significance of Work The organization promotes the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, and cultural significance of work. The associate has a responsibility to contribute to and/or participate in this effort.

Mutual Trust, Commitment and Respect The organization respects the right and responsibility of associates to promote their own physical and spiritual welfare, and to work in a manner consistent with their religious beliefs, without harm to the common good. The associate assumes primary responsibility for his/her own physical and spiritual welfare and respects the religious beliefs of others in the workplace.

The organization values loyalty to the Mission, and has a reciprocal responsibility to treat all employees with respect and dignity. An employee is expected to be respectful of and loyal to the organization and the Mission.

Effective and Honest Communication The organization utilizes confidential employee surveys or other mechanisms to evaluate job satisfaction and organizational climate, and to facilitate effective and honest communication in order to improve the work environment, and to provide associates with further opportunity to shape their work environment. The associate participates in surveys and other means of giving input regarding the organizational climate and provides honest and candid feedback.

Promoting Diversity, Equal Opportunity and Non-Discrimination The organization actively promotes diversity, equal opportunity, and non-discrimination. The associate acts in support of these principles and

assumes primary responsibility for pursuing job opportunities and maintaining and improving his/her knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Participative Decision-Making The organization supports associates with sufficient, structured opportunities to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their working conditions. The associate takes advantage of means of communication provided in a constructive and beneficial way.

Fair and Consistent Supervisory Practices The organization provides for contemporary and sound personnel practices that are administered equitably, ensuring the privacy of associates and confidentiality of personal information; appropriate orientation and clear communication of performance expectations; fair and timely performance appraisals and appropriate rewards and recognition; fair supervisory practices and due processes that protect the rights of all. The associate respects



human dignity. A "right" is a *moral claim* a person has to whatever he or she needs for the maintenance of human dignity. Individuals have a right to life and to the basic necessities that enable them to flourish in a truly human way—for example, food, shelter, clothing, education, employment, health care, and security in old age or disability. People also have rights that flow from their responsibilities to family and the common good. Indeed, people have the responsibility to respect everyone else's rights and to contribute to the common good of all.

CHURCH TEACHING ON WORKER ASSOCIATIONS

Catholic teaching on worker associations is best understood in the larger context of the church's social teaching. The tradition has three major elements pertaining to human labor.

First, the *dignity of the human person* and the *common good* are the foundational principles in any consideration of the social good. People have unique and inherent dignity, with rights and responsibilities within the common good.

Second, work is one of the principal ways that people participate in the continuing act of God's creation. The workplace should be a truly *human community*, and workers should have an active

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role in making it so. Workers should be treated fairly and should have sufficient opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Catholic social teaching, recognizing that workplace relationships are unequal, stresses the need for workers to have routine, structured opportunities to voice their views about their work.

Third, workers have a basic right to form associations such as labor unions to promote their vital interests and to gain an effective voice in their work. The church identifies respect for human dignity, just and fair treatment, a voice in the conditions of work, and the common good as proper goals for worker associations.

But it is critical to understand that the Catholic Church does *not* teach that labor unions are the *only* way for workers to have an effective voice in their work. Rather, the focus of the church's teaching is that human dignity and the common good should flourish in the workplace. For that to happen, workers must have (along with fair wages and benefits, a safe environment, and decent hours):

- Managers who provide information that enables employees to do their jobs well
- Clear performance expectations and honest

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the privacy and right to confidentiality of patients, families, and co-workers. Associates also abide by personnel policies and procedures and do their part to stay informed regarding workplace rules, issues, and expectations.

Competitive and Just Compensation The organization strives to provide competitive and fair total compensation (pay and benefits) that enables associates to sufficiently provide for themselves and their families, accounting for the individual's needs, contribution and responsibilities; considering the financial viability of the organization; and also considering Ascension Health's commitment to the common good. The associate provides a fair return in the quality and quantity of work performed.

A Safe, Healthy and Productive Work Environment The organization provides a safe, clean and attractive physical environment and other resources which are needed for efficient and effective work.

The associate exercises good stewardship over the organization's resources, using and caring for them in the proper manner.

Personal and Professional Growth and Development The organization promotes and facilitates the professional and personal growth and development of associates. The associate assumes primary responsibility for his/her professional and personal growth and takes advantage of learning opportunities offered.

Supporting a Reasonable Work/Life Balance The organization strives to provide just working conditions where persons are treated as superior to their labor; where they are treated honestly and respectfully; where their health and safety are protected; and where their hours are flexible enough to permit adequate rest, leisure time, and quality family time. The associate is responsible for maintaining an appropriate balance between his/her work and personal life and strives to ful-

fill his/her responsibilities to each.

Respecting the Right to Associate The organization respects the right and freedom of associates to participate or not to participate in employee associations, assuming that these associations behave responsibly and promote both human dignity and the common good.

Honoring Commitments and Agreements The organization honors its commitments and agreements, consistent with legal and ethical principles. The associate honors his/her agreements and commitments to the organization and to other associates.

Educating on the Ethical and Religious Directives The organization provides for ongoing instruction on the *Ethical and Religious Directives* for all associates and medical staff. The associates and medical staffs participate in educational programs and abide by the *Directives* in the workplace.

CREATING A POSITIVE WORK CLIMATE

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Today's economy is marked by decreased job security.

and timely evaluations

- Adequate methods for resolving conflicts at work and between competing interests

- Opportunities to learn and grow, along with rewards for such progress

- Opportunities to suggest possible improvements in workplace and product quality

- Encouragement to speak honestly, free of any kind of retaliation

Although Catholic teaching affirms the right of workers to form associations as a way of promoting human dignity and the common good, it does not say that joining a union is always the best mechanism for doing that. However, workers must be free to make that

determination for themselves.

In 1891, when Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, the first papal encyclical on labor, working conditions were often unjust and dangerous. Society had not yet enacted minimum wage laws, child labor laws, regulations governing hours and working conditions, or laws structuring relations between workers and management. The encyclical promoted unions as vehicles and voices for the poor and oppressed.

Working conditions and laws have since changed radically in the major industrialized nations, leading many to take the early union victories for granted. However, the church's teaching in this area remains relevant. People today are

experiencing enormous upheavals in their working conditions. Rising international competition has encouraged many industries to shift to countries with lower labor costs and minimal regulations concerning child labor and worker safety. America's own economy, formerly industrial, is now based on services and information. More and more jobs require computer skills, rather than manual labor, and are accompanied by decreased job security and increased subcontracting. Just like their forebears, contemporary workers need fair treatment, a humane work environment, and an adequate voice in their working conditions.

Pope John Paul II has written two major encyclicals addressing work: *On Human Work* and *A Hundred Years*. Both remind us of the spiritual nature of work and its necessity for human dignity and earthly progress. Reaffirming unions as a legitimate way to defend workers' vital interests, these encyclicals argue that the primary purpose of associations is to help unite people and to form community. The U. S. bishops' major pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, reminds us of the unequal power of employers and employees in a free market economy. The letter enumerates a list of "minimum guarantees" that are essential if workers are to be treated as human beings rather than a "factor of production." Unions may be one way—though not the only way—to work toward securing those minimum guarantees.

Finally, we must remember that the Catholic Church is a worldwide institution; the exploitation or unfair conditions that the church tries to address in its social teaching will vary from culture to culture and from place to place. In addition, church teaching never speaks of workers' rights without speaking of their corresponding responsibilities for the common good. Church teaching provides clear principles; but situations vary, and these principles require careful reflection and interpretation in their application. □

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