

Christian labor union emphasizes cooperation

► *Although similar to traditional labor unions, this one's stated purpose is to promote harmony.*

Z E E L A N D

By Greg Chandler
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Mike Koppenol believes there's a place for labor unions everywhere — even in traditionally nonunion communities such as Holland and Zeeland.

Koppenol is vice president of the Christian Labor Association, an independent labor union founded on Christian principles. Its national headquarters are in a small brick building on Gordon Street on Zeeland's south side, just off Business Int. 196.

The CLA isn't much different from the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters or the AFL-CIO in its advocacy of workers. However, what makes the association unique is its approach to settling conflicts, emphasizing cooperation over confrontation, he said.

"We emphasize sort of a social contract between employees and employers," Koppenol said. "Both parties are dependent on each other. We've emphasized cooperative workplace relationships through the years ... we're not so tough, we're not so hard to get along with employers."

Founded in the 1930s as a Christian alternative to secular labor unions, the CLA bases much of its belief structure on two verses of Scripture: Love your neighbor as yourself, and do unto others as they would have do unto you.

"That applies to employer-employee relationships," Koppenol said. "The employee should provide high-quality, highly productive work, and the employer should provide a living wage and benefits that allows the employee

to lead a productive life."

The CLA represents workers in 23 states, according to Koppenol. Locally, the union represents workers employed by the Associated Employers of Holland, a collection of 10 construction companies, including Parkway Electric, DePree Electric, Lamar Construction and VanderMeulen Builders.

The association also has regional offices in Willmar, Minn., and Chino, Calif. The Minnesota office works primarily with the building trades and highway construction workers, while the California office mostly represents workers in the dairy industry, Koppenol said.

In addition to its nonconfrontational approach to conflict, another area where the CLA differs from its more high-profile brethren is in political action. While the UAW, the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO pour millions of dollars into political campaigns, the CLA does not spend any money on political action or lobbyists, Koppenol said.

"We're not affiliated with the AFL-CIO for that reason," Koppenol said. "We set our own agenda, and we don't agree with some of the things the AFL-CIO does."

The CLA has ambitious goals for expanding beyond its traditional base. It recently hired a part-time organizer to seek opportunities for unionization in the health-care industry, particularly among nurse aides at nursing homes.

"It's tough work, it's low-pay work, and it takes special dedication on the part of the nurse aides and nurses who work there," Koppenol said.

Another major goal for the union for this year is improving relationships with its current membership with an enhanced communications campaign.

"If our current members feel positive about our organization, they're going to spread that word to fellow co-workers, and through that, we can make some inroads in organizing shops in our area," Koppenol said.