

THE SPRINGFIELDER

Vol. XXIX

Summer, 1965

No. 2

THE SPRINGFIELDER is published quarterly by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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Indexed in INDEX TO RELIGIOUS PERIODICAL LITERATURE, published by the American Theological Library Association, Speer Library, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

Clergy changes of address reported to Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, will also cover mailing change of *The Springfielder*. Other changes of address should be sent to the Business Manager of *The Springfielder*, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois.

Address communications to the Editor, Erich H. Heintzen, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois.

The Church and Poverty: From Concern to Action

HENRY J. EGGOLD

Essay originally presented at Rural Life Institute Short Course for Pastors, University of Illinois, Urbana, Spring, 1965.

BASIC TO A DISCUSSION of the activity of the church in relation to poverty is the prior question of the role of the church in the world. The history of the church finds the church vacillating between a private and public view of its task.

When the church takes a private view of its task, it concentrates its attention primarily on the individual's relation to God and tends to be blind to the large area of social, political, and economic environment in which people live. It accents religion in terms of man's relationship to God and views the ministry in terms of its priestly function. In this view Christ is opposed to culture.¹

At the opposite pole, is the view of the church which accents its public function. The greatest exponent of this view in our country was Walter Rauschenbusch.² For him the Kingdom of God was social, and the task of the church was envisioned as that of producing a society guided by moral principles. But in this one-sided view, Rauschenbusch tended to neglect a man's personal relationship to God.

Quiet evidently a biblical view of the church's task must take into account both private and public spheres. The prophetic way of the church is not only binding up the broken hearted but also influencing the power structures of our society, and seeking to promote justice in the political, social, and economic realms. The question remains how to accomplish this dual thrust. The answer speaks to pastor and congregation.

The Role of the Pastor

The key figure in the church's war on poverty is the pastor. We all remember the heroic work of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris and of Thomas Chalmers in Scotland in arousing people to a concern for the betterment of the poor.

The first requisite for a pastor is that he understand the problem of poverty. When George W. Webber began his work in East Harlem, he was a failure. In his desperation he called in a social worker to find out why. The social worker reported: "You are trying to be professionals, but you are not willing to be human beings who live and share the common life of the neighborhood, who live next door and are neighbors and friends with the people of East Harlem."³

The pastor must try to see behind the facelessness of poverty; he must see the misfortune of those born poor who have no lobbyist

to plead their cause; those whom technology has displaced; the 26% of the farmers who sell only 7% of the farm products; the despair of many of the 8 million aged, many of whom live alone in a large rooming house; and those trapped in the depressed areas; and the 16 million not covered by minimum wage laws. Furthermore, he must understand something of the political, economic, and social power structures of his community, state, and nation; and, furthermore, he ought to know the community resources available to assist him with coping with the sores of poverty in his own flock. Before he can accomplish much good, he must have these facts.

Our seminaries ought to see whether sufficient attention is given to this practical side of the parson's concern. Seminaries must train men for the congregation in mission, not the men the churches want or think they need, but the men they ought to have, men who know God, people, and the world in which people live.

Secondly, the pastor must be a leader and servant. James Reston remarks: "Too many preachers, like too many congressmen, are not leading but following the flock, perpetuating rather than destroying illusion and prejudice."⁴ As a leader, the pastor is to do what St. Paul says a pastor should do; namely, to equip the saints for the work of serving so that the Body of Christ may be edified.⁵

To do that he will have to engage in a prophetic ministry. The prophets not only assured God's people of God's redeeming grace but also spoke out against social and economic ills. Like a prophet, a pastor ought to give his people a fair picture of poverty. His task is to challenge the misinformation and prejudice which keeps people from taking a sympathetic view of the plight of the poor. Some of the generalizations that have to be denounced are these: 1) the poor are poor by their own fault; 2) welfare agencies are able to take care of them; 3) poor women have more children to get larger checks from the Aid to Dependent Children; 4) that God rewards the good with wealth and the evil with poverty; 5) that it is God's will on the basis of Ham's curse that the Negro be perpetually in a position of servitude. These glittering generalities that ease the consciences of Christian people need to be challenged.

Prophets not only preached. They worked actively to alleviate the situations they preached against. The pastor must combine the leader and servant role in his person, working with the power structures of our nation to rectify the wrong he finds. He has that responsibility by virtue of the fact that he is a Christian, a citizen, and a leader of men. Whatever your private opinions of Martin Luther King may be, none can deny that he is something of an example of one who combines in his person the role of leader and servant. Floyd Hunter, in his *Community Power Structure*, found that ministers, teachers, and social workers are in the "hold the line" level of influence, while industrial, commercial, financial, and political power structures "set the line."⁶ Are we men enough to change this?

Again, the pastor has a responsibility to equip the saints for service. We have to preach not only the faith which believes but the faith which works by love. Christians must not only be comforted with the forgiveness of sins, but captives of the love of Christ; they are to ask Paul's question: "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" They must see both their duty and privilege in Christ's name of giving a cup of water to the thirsty. In short, we are to create the creators of a society, men and women who in Christ's name will go about their calling pleading the cause of the poor and needy. For it is ultimately in the person of the Christian that Christ and culture meet.

The Role of the Congregation

Together with its pastor, the Christian congregation must assume its role of responsibility in the war against poverty. Social scientists and theologians alike have been loud in decrying the ineffectiveness of the average congregation in meeting the needs of the underprivileged. Peter Berger says: "Organized religion is irrelevant to the major social forces which are operative and determinative in American society: it does not affect them and relates to them in an overwhelmingly passive way."⁷ Martin Marty cries: "The parish is sick unto death . . . the parish as we have inherited it is not doing the task and cannot do the task to which Christ has committed his Church in the world."⁸

One of the things that must die is the clubbism of many a congregation. For too many people a church is a club where you pay your dues, enjoy the company of your kind of people, and enjoy the benefits the church is able to give you and your family. Too many churches are self-centered units, bent on being served and maintaining themselves. The church's doors are virtually closed to the outsider, and the windows of the church are sealed off from the cries of the poor and needy. This drawing of the boundaries of the church in terms of a spiritual and ethical elite is, Fackre says, a short step to Pharisaism.⁹

Instead, our churches need to become houses of prayer for all people, where people are not united on the basis of economic status or ethnic background, but on the basis of discipleship. Here perhaps we can learn something from Alcoholic Anonymous.

Secondly, our congregations ought to be societies of the concerned. Love manifested in congregational life performs a sign function in the community. It says: "Here is the way it should be everywhere. Here is a place where people are treated as persons and not as things."¹⁰ The world saw the early church and said, "Behold how they love one another."

One of the ways in which the congregation can manifest this concern is in a revival of the diaconate. The deacons in the early church were charged particularly with the care of the poor. We can accomplish this purpose if we will divide our parishes into neighborhoods, with a deacon responsible for no more than ten families. He visits these families at least four times during the year, report-

ing any need the family may have, in order that the congregation may minister spiritually or physically to the family.

Again, a congregation ought to be built around come-and-go structures. Come structures are those which minister to the individual. Chief among these, of course, is the worship in which, in this dehumanizing world, a man finds that he together with all Christians is the child of God by faith in Christ Jesus. Allied with the church service are the organizations which can provide support to the individual in his battle of life.

As much as we need the come structures, we need also the go structures, which open the windows of the church to the world. Here the church learns of the problems of society; the poor in its neighborhood, the cause of crime, job training, placement of disadvantaged people, nursery schools, drop outs, the race problem, housing, the power structures of the community and how they work. Through the go structures the members are challenged to meet the social inequities in their community as well as in the world and to take constructive action.

A further concern of the church is to gather the poor into the fold of the church. In the inner-city, the suburbs, or rural areas, the poor are there. But to gain them for the church is not easy because poverty actually separates people from the church. The sense of shame, inadequacy, and inferiority prevent the poor from trying to enter the church. How shall we gain them? Churchmen are recommending the cell approach and the revival of the church in the house, particularly as a means of gaining those who for one reason or another find it hard to enter a church. Three or more couples gather in a home for Bible study, prayer, and discussion of avenues of service and witness. The cell becomes the basis for evangelistic outreach as new couples are invited to join the group. As the cell enlarges, new cells are formed. This approach to the poor can work effectively in the old, established neighborhood, the suburbs, and in the rural areas.¹¹

Another area of concern for the church is the concrete jungle of the inner-city, the home of the Negro, the dispossessed Ookie who moves to the city, the alcoholic, and the beatnik. One of the sorriest chapters in the history of the church in America is the abandonment of the inner-city for the comfortable suburbs. One of the greatest challenges of the church is that of humanizing and Christianizing the inner-city.

To do this effectively, the church ought to think in terms of a team ministry of clergymen who are able to deal effectively with the various ethnic groups, of social workers who assist, and of physicians and psychiatrists who serve as consultants. Since the financial resources of the inner-city are negligible, the suburban churches ought to assist both financially and in service. The inner-city ought to be their common concern. In his book, *The Suburban Captivity of the Church*, Gibson Winter describes this program.¹²

A final area concern for the congregation is the establishment of nursing homes for the aged. Of our 40 to 50 million poor, 8 million are over 65 years of age. With more and more people facing the loneliness, emptiness, and insecurity of old age, every year, certainly the churches of the land have a challenge to provide a haven for our senior citizens.

Supra-parochial Forms

Emerging in the twentieth century are also supra-parochial forms of Christian witness. Perhaps at the head of the list we should put the denominational social action committees. The social action committee has as its primary objective to be in dialog with the power structures of our country particularly on the national level.

A new significant development has come to us from the evangelical academies of Europe. A European theologian told our faculty that since the organized church was ineffective in maintaining a dialog both with the common man and with the power structures, representatives of both groups are invited to weekend retreats to discuss their problems in order to attempt to arrive at a morally acceptable solution. The National Council of Churches makes use of specialists and leaders of management, labor, agriculture, and government, in conferences on church and economic life. We find this approach reflected in the establishment of coffee houses. One such is Encounter, a lay center in the heart of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, founded by the United Church of Christ clergy and laity. This institution has proved to be a fermenting factor in the life of the participating congregations and of the county.

Another significant development is the institutional chaplaincy. Chaplains have the opportunity to provide aid to people when they need it most. Without a doubt this phase of ministry deserves to be expanded.

Industrialists are calling for industrial missionaries, whom management sees as conciliators between labor and management.

Finally, a recent development is the establishment of the office of the metropolitan missionary, whose task it is to be in dialog with the city power structures and to coordinate urban work.

Perhaps the future of our civilization will give birth to other forms of ministry. But however many forms this ministry may take, basically the war against poverty and injustice must be fought on the level of the local congregation. The church will always need pastors who are willing to wear the mantle of priest, prophet, leader, and servant. Congregations will have to be concerned about the ministry to their own members but with their church's windows open to the world. In this way, under the blessing of Almighty God, we can hope to do our part in translating our concern for poverty into action.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cfr., H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951).
2. Cfr., Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, ed., Robert D. Cross (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).
3. Gabriel J. Fackre, *The Pastor and the World* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964), p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
5. Ephesians 4:11-12.
6. Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), pp. 109 ff.
7. Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 38.
8. Martin E. Marty, ed., *Death and Rebirth of the Parish* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 4.
9. Fackre, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
11. This approach is described in Abbe Michonneau, *Revolution in the City Parish* (London: Blackfriar Publications, 1957).
12. Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Church* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1961), pp. 89 ff.