

*The context of Christianity is always social,
the content gospel.*

Canadians crave meaningful spiritual lives. The latest poll, conducted for Maclean's magazine indicates this.

The poll shows also that most Canadians are sympathetic and willing to assist neighbours in their need.

Too much organized Christianity has belaboured a message that calls for penitence with the promise of a better hereafter. Many churches appear as a "bland island of serenity" rather than being a vanguard of God's people carrying Jesus' word of love and justice into the controversial corners of the world.

Long ago a Hebrew prophet, known to us as Second Isaiah, spoke out to the people of Israel who had suffered defeat and exile as a nation and reminded them that their belief to be elected by God as the people and spokespersons for God in their time was an election, not to salvation, but to service. To be a nation and to be God's Servant was pretty much one and the same thing for Israel. Israel was to survive the Exile because they were to serve the world.

Isaiah spoke of the urging of the divine spirit and declared: "*I am about to do a new thing.*" He spoke in terms of revival of faith and service and characterized the movement as "*rivers in the desert.*"

Today there are discernible signs that the institutional forms of Christianity are being replaced by less organized, more spontaneous, independent, personal witness to the faith by individuals in their daily lives with little regard to belonging to a specific organization. Many of those who do maintain their membership and activity in the church and its programmes are openly sharing their faith and beliefs in concert with other churches and faith groups as they find possible. This speaks well for the future of religion among us.

Christianity, at its heart, calls persons to take seriously the shape and structures of society, and the changes that are taking place in them, not to apply some pattern of

rigid church forms to a new situation, but actually to let the forms of society shape the new forms of church life. Today there is in our society an incredible diversification of the areas of responsible decision. The church as an institution is finding it very difficult to free itself from its inherited forms to be present in these areas of decision in such a way as to disclose within its institutional life the mandate of the Christian gospel.

Today there is in a real sense a scattering of the church and a Christian witness being given by those "dispersed."

(The Gospel in Newness, cont'd)

The Christian gospel engages persons in their daily and common life to articulate and embody God's reach for humanity. It is not a challenge to moral living, nor an invitation to thinking dogma, nor a call to membership in the institutional church, but news of personal, spiritual fulfillment. It is good news for the homeless, the lonely, the forsaken, the aimless, the broken hearted, the faltering and the dying.

The divine spirit of love is not confined within any edifice, but is free in the world, working in homes, in schools, in businesses, in people's pleasure, in politics, in law - an invading of all the social order, including the lowest. It delivers a freedom to leave illusion and to step into reality.

We are now in an age of "secular Christianity," The term "secular" has taken on a new meaning today, defining what is being of our own age and in our own world. In other words, we will arrive at a fully Christian understanding of Immanuel - God with us - our secular God. Some of us can say today that the world is our church or, with the words of the late Bishop John Robinson in "Honest to God", "The charter of the church is to be the servant of the world."

The "new thing" in Christianity now means the readiness to take off the swaddling clothes of fixed norms, the removal of the scaffolding of "Christendom" and the "establishment" and the deliverance of Christian fellowship into an "open" world where witness to the love and teachings of Christ has to be given through a "style of life" in which ultimate meaning is disclosed in the midst of the struggle for free participation by all people in the life of the realm

of God.

The gospel for Christians insists that both the gathered life of Christians in worship, and their scattered life in the world, must be truly "in" and "for" the world, and for the "outsider" and their whole culture.

The Canadian journalist and author, Ron Graham, stated in his book, "God's Dominion," that:

"I now know that our existence is infinitely more mysterious, more miraculous, and more complex than the average atheist and agnostic would suppose. Even rational science says that the hands before us, the pages we behold, and the chairs in which we sit are nothing but masses of tiny particles! If we truly understand that, we would not be so complacent about this mundane experience.

COMMON FAITH FOUND AMONG DENOMINATIONS

A survey conducted by editors of eight American denominational publications showed that differences among denominations are less pronounced nowadays than differences within each denomination.

This trend, coupled with the influence of the ecumenical movement has led to an unprecedented levelling across denominations and to a homogeneity of belief and practice.

A majority of Roman Catholics and half of the generally liberal United Church agreed there are other ways to salvation besides believing in Jesus. Strong majorities of other Protestants disagreed.

One Purpose, Many Faiths

The provision of spiritual and religious care in the Ontario Public Service is supported by the member faith traditions which make up the Ontario Multifaith Council on Spiritual and Religious Care.

These collaborating faith groups take part with the provincial government through programmes in three ministries - Solicitor General & Correctional Services, Community and Social Services, and Health.

Spiritual and Religious care is the joint responsibility of the Government and the faith groups of the province. At least 35 faith groups are affiliated with the council.

The OMCSRS appoints and gives leadership to various committees, the members of which address the more detailed aspects of the Council's work. These Regional Multifaith Committees promote an effective working relationship among the regional faith groups and local faith communities, chaplaincy Services Ontario, and local faith communities.

I have been appointed by Hamilton Conference of the United Church to the membership of the Hamilton/Brantford/Niagara Regional Multifaith Committee and have been elected secretary of the committee. We meet bi-monthly.

The above committee has a membership of interested Christian denominations and representatives of Judaism, Hinduism, Jainism, Baha'i, Pagan, and Aboriginal.

It is a rewarding and exciting experience working alongside the people of other faith groups. The co-operation and respect for one another in the work of the RMC is extraordinary and beautiful.

Through my own efforts a Brantford branch of the RMC has been organized. At present we have eight members and growing. One of our first

achievements was to initiate a plan whereby cases of persons exhibiting violent or inappropriate behaviour and picked up by the police and lodged in jail are immediately assessed by a designated person from the psychiatric ward of the hospital, and if a mental health case removed to the hospital.

If you are an Ontario resident there will be a RMC for your area and you may be able to assist the work they are performing.

HAPPINESS HAS TO BE FOUND IN THE PRESENT

There was a gasoline station in Australia with the sign, "Free Petrol Tomorrow." Nobody ever got free gas because tomorrow never comes.

We now face a new year and many will make resolutions and put forth aspirations for the coming days. Tomorrow I will do this or that, we say. This is putting off the step and tomorrow may never come.

The tiny word "now" means the present time or moment. It may look innocent and simple, but in it mystery is packed; the mystery of time. And time always reminds us not to postpone living, not to defer important decisions by fantasizing on tomorrow's shadowy possibilities.

A card-playing acquaintance told me one day that if he could live his life over again he would have played the ace of spades differently yesterday. Most of us would do many things differently if we could live our lives over again. But New Years reminds us of the opportunity to begin again, to seize what is now, and to go forward.

The English poet Cowley wrote: "Nothing is there to come, and nothing past, But an eternal now does

(Eternal Now, cont'd)

ever does ever last." In the midst of time, in the now, we experience eternity. Eternal life, life with depth and all other dimensions and qualities that deserve to carry on forever is found in the now.

St. Paul was able to declare through his religious experience, "...my present life is not that of the old 'I', but the living Christ within me." And St. John proclaimed in his First Letter of John: "Here and now, my dear friends, we are God's children. We don't know what we shall become in the future."

You and I are here to fulfill - fill full - our lives. We will live now as befitting children of God.

RELIGION HAS A ROLE IN POLITICS

There are those who argue that politics should remain out of the church (as if it could). But, having lived a week in the hurly-burly of the world, it is understandable for some to desire to seek something other than a continuance of the secular disputes in their religious refuge.

But, for those who attend church to worship it must be remembered that worship calls for sacrifice. Any faith group gathered in worship is a microcosm, a miniature copy of the community in the world. Worship calls upon the worshipper to realize and commit themselves to the larger world around them. It brings one to the realization we owe each other love, and the action that flows from that.

When the church seriously works for the transformation of individual character for the good, then people are led, not away from social questions, but straight into them.

When this happens politics will no longer be defined in the tired,

pessimistic, and negative manner as "the art of compromise" but as the art of expression of the people's will and needs.

Religion can cure us of blindness, compelling us to see our needy neighbour. It leads us to clean up the dirt - wherever we find it -including political life. "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good people do nothing," said Edmund Burke. As leaven in society we each have great responsibilities and opportunities in a democratic society.

The church, or religious group, that does not endeavour to change the community for the better has separated the spiritual interests of individual souls from the social situation, and thereby lost their function.

The church has a mandate to be persuasive, to help one to look within themselves for their "must" and "ought." One should become committed to doing what one feels and believes is good and right.

"Religion NOW" received a letter of response to our June issue on Eco-Theology from Gordon Campbell, MLA, Leader of the Official Opposition in British Columbia, in which he states: "...I know we can protect the environment while maintaining an economy in which people can earn a living, provide for their families and their future. My experience ... persuades me that many elements together are required for an efficient and compassionate society. Please be assured that one of the priorities of the BC Liberal Caucus is the environment."

"Religion NOW" is published in limited edition for family and friends by the Rev. Ross E. Readhead, B.A., B.D., Certificate in Corrections, McMaster University. Address mail to comments@religionnow.ca