

ACME TO THINGS TO COME

There is an urgent need for a renewal movement within the Christian churches today if they are to survive. The times are dictating that a new page of Christian history needs to be written. For the first time since the Reformation Christians are being brought together not on the basis of creeds and doctrines, but because some of them are beginning to hear the voice of the Spirit calling them to work together in the street and alleys, factories and offices, hospitals and legislative offices of a world in need of sacrificial service and dedicated commitment.

Therefore, in these days of uncertainty over the future of the church, I wish to engage in a little speculation, even prophecy, on the shape of things to come in the Christian churches.

There is a hunger for spiritual wellness in people today - but never on Sunday. The continuance in so many churches of an observance of worship to an external deity, a God "up there," a three-tier universe of earth, a heaven, and a hell, antiquated theology, and too much conservatism of belief, is losing the churches younger membership at an alarming rate. Strangely, most of them fail to recognize why their membership is dropping and they are seen as little consequence in the contemporary world.

churches is that Christianity has moved beyond the walls of organized Christianity and become the *dispersed church* of people living their faith in their daily lives on their own, experimenting and testing their faith in a secular world where the human is creditable and the supernatural is not.

Today some are learning that *the church is a happening*. It is becoming fashioned from the real and everyday world, a world it celebrates, probes, and comments upon. The church where it is alive and functioning today "happens" where we are sure it cannot, and it happens whether you believe it or not. Like grace, a church happening is one of the spiritual surprises we call "God," and we seldom can predict it.

It doesn't happen the same way twice and it is shaped tremendously by the people who perform and the space where it takes place.

Recently I was the guest speaker at a small morning coffee-club group in a rural Anglican church. I spoke about the thrills, the strong senses of elation, we can experience in our religion. The group did not appear to have experienced much of this recently. Then one older farm-woman told with tears in her eyes of "the beautiful Jehovah Witness prayer of grace" that her

The saving factor for the

THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE, cont'd

daughter had given at their Thanksgiving family dinner. This woman found the strength to share her "thrill" with her (disapproving?) friends.

The church of the future, if there is to be a church, must be outreaching, learning to say, "Here we are. We are going to be with you right where you live. We're not going to pull you out of your environment; we're not going to make you a part of an institution to keep the institution going. And if we have to let the old temples and institutions go and just witness to the fact that the Christian spirit of love must work through us in the world, we are going to do just that."

Christians of the "dispersed church," those of us who don't attend, at least regularly, the conventional church of today, can say to a person, you are now in church. We are right with you where you are. We will be the instrument of God's reconciliation to you here. We can say we are the church, we are that miracle of God's grace. Of course we don't say it just that way, but this is the conviction that will have to be expressed.

The church of the future will not take seriously just the "gathering," but the going forth. Think of the freedom such a congregation would have - its mobility, with almost none of the paraphernalia or baggage of the institution - with all its energy available for its mission.

The clue to the church of the future will be *inclusiveness*. It will make little distinction between "true believers," inquirers, and non-believers. There must be an openness to develop a community of humankind that includes Christians, agnostics, atheists, persons of

faith and unfaith. The touchstone of the community will still be the Christian gospel of love, which will continue to wait and seek to do its work.

Perhaps a forerunner of this kind of church is the present Regional Multifaith Committees For Spiritual and Religious Care in Ontario. The committee of which I am a member, the Brantford/Hamilton/Niagara RMC, is composed of eighteen different faith groups, including Christians, Baha'is, Muslims, Hindus, even the Wiccan Church. The committee is a focused group, works in harmony at its tasks, and enjoys the respect and contributions of each of its members. We share in worship, in learning, in supporting one another, and in working together. There is fellowship and a comradeship that is distinctive.

The secularized Christian community, deprived of its religious activities, spiritual games, and holy calendars, will be freed to discover the new shape of mission in terms of human need and the social structures given by the world.

It was thirty-six years ago, Bishop John Robinson, in his book, "Honest to God," stated "...that Christianity should be equated in the public mind, inside as well as outside the Church, with 'organized religion' merely shows how far we have departed from the New Testament. For the last thing the Church exists to be is an organization for the religious. Its charter is to be servant of the world." (Page 134).

Let us recognize that the church will never again be as it was in our childhood memories. Technology and the post-modern world has changed that. Society is moving so fast and gaining knowledge so rapidly that we have to keep abreast with it all if

CHRISTIANS IN EXILE, cont'd

we are to give and exchange information and ideas with the present and future generations.

At present the churches are too institutionalized to permit significant changes to take place. Those of us seeking to create renewal within the church find ourselves marginalized, rejected, and silenced. Then it is we become exiles, part of the "dispersed" church, which today in many of our communities is larger than the organized, institutional church. How this new form of Christianity will redesign itself I do not know. Perhaps it too will disappear. But I think not! I am a strong believer in Love as the motivating power for actuality and good within us and in the world. We must let this power, this force loose in our lives and the world. It will enable us to become fully our human and spiritual potential.

The following excerpt is from the book, "Why Christianity Must Change Or Die," by John Shelby Spong, Harper; San Francisco Publishers, 1998, \$18.00, pages 225f.

"Religion is...a human attempt to process the God experience, which breaks forth from our own depths and wells up constantly within us. We must lay down, therefore, the primitive claims we have made for our religious traditions. None of them is drawn from otherworldly revelations. None of them is inerrant or infallible. None of them represents the only way to God. None of them can be used legitimately to coerce or compel another to belief. All evangelical and missionary activities designed to convert the

heathen are base born. They are the expressions of our sense of superiority and our hostility toward those who are different. The only divine mission in life that the Church of the future could possibly have is to open people to a recognition that the ground of their very being is holy and that when they are in touch with that holy Ground of Being they can share in God's creation by giving life, love, and being to others....The Christians of the world are not here to build institutions, to convert other people, or even to claim we can speak for God. Those aspects of our religious heritage must be sacrificed as the pre-modern misunderstandings of our primitive history. We are now exile people."

There is an aboriginal belief that everyone is a house of four rooms: a physical, a mental, an emotional and a spiritual.

Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time, but unless we go into every room every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not complete.

"My children, let us love not merely in theory or in words - let us love in sincerity and in practice."

The First Letter of John, ch.3, vs. 18.

The Way

by Ross Readhead

You will not be saved
By General Motors
Or your corporate wealth.

You will not be saved
By globalization
Or the free markets.

You will not be saved
By the revolution of common
sense
Or by the common weal.

You will not be saved
By larger prisons and jails
Or by the severity of the law.

You will not be saved
By means of chance
Or the luck of the lottery.

You will not be saved
By religion's solemn
assemblies
Or merely the talk of justice.

You will not be saved
Unless you come to grips
With the spirit of your soul.

*Then who can be saved
Jesus' listeners asked.
They were told
To leave it to God;*

*To those who follow
The way of love;
Be a part
Of the realm of God.*

*Love can be costly,
It can demand your all,
But it makes you see
The divine in us all.*

"If a child lives with criticism, he
learns to condemn.
If a child lives with hostility, he
learns to fight.
If a child lives with ridicule, he
learns to be shy.
If a child lives with shame, he
learns to feel guilty.
If a child lives with tolerance, he
learns to be patient.
if a child lives with encouragement,
he learns confidence.
If a child lives with praise, he
learns to appreciate.
If a child lives with fairness, he
learns justice.
If a child lives with security, he
learns to have faith.
If a child lives with approval, he
learns to like himself."

by Dorothy Nolte

Canada is a great country, one
of the best in the world, largely
because of our tolerance of *variety*.
The cultural pluralism of Canada
makes us a mirror of the world.
Together we live with respect and
general goodwill toward one another.
We have been able to recognize the
worth in a great variety of human
values, ideals, and religious views.

We are not a "melting pot" society,
but rather a mosaic, a model for the
world in how to live together in
appreciation and goodwill.

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