

THE CHURCH AND COUNTRY LIFE

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THE COUNTRY CHURCH

S. L. Morris

Changed conditions, economic, social, educational, moral, and religious, are tremendously affecting modern life from every angle. A new era, dominated by new thought, new problems, new environs, and new ideals, has created a new world of thought and life. It is as if the old dispensation had passed away and a new dispensation had been ushered in.

Whether for better or for worse, leadership has passed from the country. Once it contained the mass of the people. Now the city is attracting not simply the floating population but the mechanical genius, the business skill, and the intellectual talent of the country. Once the country church, pastored by the highest type of intellectual and spiritual ministry, influenced the national life, setting the standard of morals and leading great revivals, resulting in religious upheavals, reaching to the remotest nooks and corners of the country. Now the scepter of leadership, moral, intellectual, and spiritual, is passing to the city. Is it the survival of the fittest?

The influence of the country on life and character can be only partially apprehended, even after an array of facts and figures as familiar as twice-told tales. Rural scenery and honest toil are calculated to make strong men physically, gigantic men intellectually, and clean men morally and spiritually. It is the psychological explanation of the recognized fact that the

country church was formerly the mother of teachers, statesmen, and theologians.

City churches are being recruited from the country not only in numbers but in moral fiber. "What are you doing, away out in the backwoods?" asked a city pastor of a country minister. "I am engaged," replied he, "in the work of helping you to save your city." If the church but appreciated the significance of this statement, it would recognize that the gifts of the rich city church to evangelize the country are in reality an indirect investment for its own salvation. If country life degenerates and the rural church disintegrates, where will come the moral force to counteract the degenerating influence of our increasingly corrupt cities?

Roosevelt's Country Life Commission sounded the keynote of the first great reform needed: "Any consideration of the problem of rural life that leaves out of account the function and possibilities of the church and of related institutions would be grossly inadequate, . . . because, from the purely sociological point of view, the church is fundamentally a necessary institution in country life."

One need not travel far afield to discover the causes resulting in the disintegration of the country church. Shifting populations are perhaps the most potent factor. Cities do not grow phenomenally by means of their own natural increase. At the beginning of the nineteenth century less than four per cent. of the population was urban; but at present over forty-six per cent. live in the city.

The growth of the city is at the expense of the country, which is drained of its best blood and talent; and the social, educational, and commercial advantages of the city lure to these more attractive fields.

The tenant system of farming is paralyzing the energies of the religious forces. Men who do not own homes and who in all probability will change their dwelling-place by another year have no great incentive either to build or to maintain neighborhood churches. No wonder then that it has been said that greater than war, pestilence, and famine is the curse of landlordism.

The spiritual interests of the rural districts are subjected to absent treatment. The absentee pastor afflicts the church with his presence on Saturday evening, for once a month preaching, and he takes his flight by the earliest train on Monday. Only in the remotest degree does he touch the social or spiritual life of the community. The tenant system of farming is no greater curse to the country than the tenant ministry is to the country church.

This criticism of the tenant system of the ministry has no reference whatever to the noble army of itinerant preachers who have served as pioneers in destitute regions, nor to the self-denying pastors of groups which could not in any other way secure the services of the sanctuary. Such men are making the supreme sacrifice of life and are making the care of souls their chief concern.

The facts are easily ascertained and the reasons for

the disintegration of the country church will scarcely provoke debate. The chief consideration is the remedy. The effective remedy is the evangelistic pastor, whose earnest messages are inspired by genuine love of souls, inducing a revival all the year round, and who in every house ceases not "to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ."

Definite sacrifices must be made. "The preacher and his family must make their sacrifices as definitely as if they went to China or to Africa to preach the gospel." It is easier to die a martyr's death than to endure the lifelong martyrdom of a sacrificial life in an obscure pastorate. Let the church challenge her most promising men and see how many will respond. If the church can secure volunteers of this character it will be comparatively easy to save the country church; and it would carry conviction to the world if the greatest of all Christ's works were reproduced,—the preaching of the gospel to the poor.

The key to the situation is the country pastor. Illustrations are on record of marvelous results accomplished by such men as Matthew B. McNutt, C. O. Gill, Harlow S. Mills, and others. The same men with the same equipment and the same methods would succeed in almost any community or denomination. If we could secure a sufficient number of such men so as to constitute a chain, linking neighborhood to neighborhood, we can well imagine resuscitated communities and revived churches, till the country church becomes once more a great moral standard and a spiritual force throughout the bounds of the nation,

while the thrill of its revived life and expanding activities would reach "unto the uttermost part of the earth."

ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMISSION ON THE CHURCH AND COUNTRY LIFE

Warren H. Wilson

In proposing the form of organization of this Commission one must first consider what is the function of the Federal Council itself. It is one of several federations, each of which has a place as a service organization in united Protestantism. These organizations do not rule or govern one another, and they avoid competition with one another. This results in a division of function. The Federal Council is, therefore, one of the agencies in the list in which belong the Young Men's Christian Association, the Missionary Education Movement, the Laymen's Missionary Movement, and recently the Men and Religion Movement. These are financed separately, possess the allegiance of the churches, and serve, each of them, a definite purpose.

This is very characteristic of rural organization throughout the world. In the best organized country life we know the multi-cellular type prevails. Co-operative creameries have attached to them egg-gathering associations. Rural credit societies are as-