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Ministry, Mission and the Social Sciences

(2.) "The Gathered Community"

THE previous article[1] looked at some aspects of the sociological context of the mission of the Church in urban technological society, illustrating the uses of religious sociology. Here the emphasis is going to be more on the understanding of group behaviour discussed in relation to the local church as an organised institution in society. We have already begun to indicate some of the ways in which it is important to see the congregation in its social context. This will be taken further in terms of its own self understanding.

I. "The congregational way"

It was part of the beliefs of "Independency" that "God's people are of the willing sort", gathering themselves together into congregations of the Church visible, marked out by the voluntary and joyous acceptance of belonging to Christ's people, under his word, keeping his ordinances and accepting his discipline. This was, first, the expression of the Lordship of Christ over his people. Christ's people were to be, visibly, saints, walking in the right paths. Thus the discipline was to keep the Church pure by scrutinising admissions and purging offenders. At the same time it was a rejection of the authority of the state over things spiritual which effectively meant a denial of the unity of Chistendom in which culture and faith had been held together. The Church, therefore, was to be seen as autonomous, solely under the word of God, a beacon in the world.

Yet it has always been recognised that perfection, while to be striven for, is not achieved. We live in history, in the tension of what St. Paul called "the in-between-times", longing for the not yet while rejoicing in the power of the Spirit that makes sanctification a growing, present reality. Thus the Lordship of Christ over his people can so easily be demoted into his governance only over part of his people's lives, the "spiritual", while at the same time Christian faith affirms his lordship over all creation as well as over the Church. How far, too, is it possible to separate saint from sinner? Baptist history tells of a series of controversies which are really about the "purity" of the Church. From Bunyan's time there has been an ecumenical problem. The discussion about the place of children still rumbles on. And we must recognise that, apart from limited periods, the Baptist cause has been maintained very largely through family loyalty. Similarly it is not possible to escape the cultural realities of the age, especially in its understanding of religion. Baptist churches are as likely as any to conform to the current expectation as to what a church is for, even if apparently seeming to have a wide variation of expression. Nor can Baptist congregations escape reflecting the "folk" religion of the time, however much they strive to serve "the pure milk of the word".

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Nevertheless, the Baptist tradition strives to express something real and vital in Christian living, partly in contrast to other traditions, partly as a variant of a common concern. Perhaps something of what this is can be indicated in terms of healing, loving and serving. The community of the Church endeavours to offer to the broken a place of forgiveness, acceptance and healing. Within the Church there should be found something of an experiment in living out the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Christians should be known, collectively and individually as those who are enabled to serve their fellows because of their secret hidden life in Christ. It is obvious, however, that these are not only, too frequently, lamentably absent, but are in tension with each other. The healing community contains within it those whose various inadequacies brings tensions into fellowship and who cannot carry others' burdens. Attention to fellowship can so easily mean having to ignore those outside. Service requires those who are strong and can undermine the necessary means of fostering fellowship. The point is that the inadequacies of the Church are not merely the results of failure, but are inherent in the nature of Christian living. The Church is probably and inexorably caught up in the position of being *"simul justus, simul peccator"*. In this situation it is not enough to know what the "high calling" is, but to understand how it is inextricably entwined in the reality of human hopes, fears and relationships.

II. Community

Community is "in" these days. Everyone endeavours to enhance community. Yet is is difficult to discover what this precisely means. Indeed it is often only the context which suggests the meaning. But such a concern must reflect some kind of felt need, a reaction against what appears to be a lack in modern society. Toennies argued that industrial society inevitably moved from smaller personal groupings (*Gemeinschaft*) to large, impersonal organisational structures (*Gesellschaft*). The truth of such assertions have to be tested empirically. The value of the idea can be and is used in all kinds of ways.

There is in fact no such thing as "community" which can be identified. What we can see is that people live in a network of relationships which link them together in various ways at different levels of their life. Two things seem to be implied by the idea of community. First that human beings recognise that they belong to different types of groupings. Some are very small, like friendship, whose organisation and *raison d'être* is loose and informal. Some are very extensive and basically functional, like the state or political party. Between these there is a pattern of relationships which are close enough to be manageable, where personalities count and one gets a sense of belonging and support. Yet within this there are functional roles which are recognised and accepted that give identity and purpose. Such patterns vary in size and intimacy, are not necessarily self contained (e.g. a local political party) nor do they lack formal structures. People can belong to more than one, though probably there is a hierarchy of loyalties in

the event of conflict. And it would seem that it is necessary for any-
thing like a full human life for people to belong to one or more com-
munity, just as they need families of some kind. This is true even if it
is achieved at the expense of self-abnegation, as by the village idiot. It
can also be seen how the community can control the behaviour of its
members who get their identity by belonging.

This whole question of community is central to the Church. The
congregation is part of a local community, one relationship structure in
an area. It is also, in itself, a community in that it is a group of people
working together and organised for particular internal and external
functions. Beyond this, however, there is the ideological factor, that
the Church exists to express a quality of community which is described
as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Human desires for identity,
belonging, usefulness and co-operation are thereby bound up with the
promise of fellowship in Christ. Indeed the two tend to become identi-
fied so that the weaknesses of the human situation are sanctified in the
name of faith. It becomes necessary for the sake of the Gospel to
separate the two, not in theory only but in any and every situation.
The presence of Christ is not only healing but judgement. The sin
against the Holy Spirit is, surely, to identify one's own personal needs
with the will of God.

So it is worthwhile reminding ourselves constantly that the emotional
content of community can have many causes and relate to many situa-
tions. What makes for community? Locality is obviously important,
and the more isolated and static the group, the more important it is.
But the village of romantic nostalgia is also oppressive. There is no
escape. Conflicts have to be contained. Oddities have to be accom-
modated. This has its advantages in that responsibilities cannot be
avoided. It can, equally, be emotionally corrupt and enervating. In any
case as we have already indicated, modern society is in the main
mobile and even the village community is now artificial in that people
choose to live there and can leave at will. Modern villages are more
and more extensions of suburbia.

Community of interest is more characteristic of contemporary man.
This obviously holds for the Church but in fact it only emphasises the
institutional nature of the Church as one interest group alongside
others. Geographical restriction is thereby overcome. Membership can
be attracted from a wide area allowing the point of common interest
to be more narrowly defined. Differences of churchmanship can thus be
maintained.

Common concern, when it is important enough, can overcome other
barriers. This is strengthened when there are other common factors.
Shared experience, such as the war or training, makes for a common
language and shared assumptions. For Christians this could be in terms
of religious experience. Some kind of external threat also creates group
feeling whether a disaster or the fear of external control. Even internal
conflict can paradoxically sustain community.

In all these cases, however, community is defined to some extent

over against the rest of the world. This is right and necessary, conforming to the limitations of human life, and the definition of legitimate purposes. The tension is between having a meaningful unit that is at the same time open to others so that it is not a means of unnecessary or improper division. In Christian terms, how can we put Christ at the centre, defining ourselves by him, and allowing the boundaries to define themselves?[2]

III. What is the Church for?

Looking more closely at the local church it is important to distinguish between intention and actuality. The aims of the Church can be variously expressed in terms of witness to the Gospel but it is clear that both for its own members and in terms of the world, there is an evangelical task. However, too much of our Church life assumes that what is actually done is directly related to that stated aim, whereas very little reflection will show that frequently the ongoing activity really subserves something other. This is not necessarily a criticism of what is done. It may be that the effective results that keep a loyal group engaged in an activity is in fact legitimate in terms of the Gospel. But we can never know unless we are honest about what is really happening, and only then can some attempt be made to evaluate and correct what may be wrong.

Thus a men's group, set up as an evangelising means, fails to attract anyone. Some investigation reveals that the group represents a faction in the community of longstanding. It therefore represents a barrier to the outside and its failure reinforces the group in its suspicion of the degeneracy of the rest of the community. Or again a "successful" church can find that it is in fact providing a refuge for the bewildered in an insecure society. This is certainly one function of the Church but it is easy to fall into the temptation of leaving these people in a false security rather than also proclaim the challenge of the Gospel. Conflict in churches is often an expression of a conflict in this area of unexamined assumptions. Fear of conflict, rationalised as breaking fellowship, suppresses any chance to get at the reality causing the impotence.

Another tension is to be found between two of the functions of groups or organisations. In the jargon, groups can be "task" oriented or "sentient" groups. The former are formed, cohere and exist round a job to be done. Any working group is of this kind. The latter are there primarily to provide support for the members; they like to be there for the company. Obviously, these are not mutually exclusive. Certainly any kind of real loyalty and reliability must mean a "sentient" attachment to the group as well as agreement on the task. Yet it is clear that a "task" group can lose its real purpose and become something else. We all know meetings that continue for the sake of keeping going. Yet even such a group only continues because its gets something out of it. It may, however, be better to accept it for what it really is.

The Church is both a "task" and a "sentient" group. It has to

witness and to offer fellowship. Thus it is important, first, to understand how both these elements are knit together in the complexity of congregational organisation. Some groups are more for one purpose than others but all should contribute to the welfare of the whole. Both must be accepted in their place. Secondly we should be aware of the dangers involved. It is too easy for "fellowship groups" to become props for each other's weakness or means of psychological exploitation. It would appear that the tragedy of so much of the Jesus Movement has been that rootless, dependent youngsters have been taken over by, perhaps sincere, dominating personalities. There is too much emotional blackmail in evangelicalism.

What is beginning to emerge is the need to have an organisational model of the Church so that the basic aims are more clearly defined and the interrelated activities can be helped to function properly. The trouble is that it is difficult to fit the Church in naturally into any one model. This is not to be unexpected since models must by definition, simplify patterns to essentials, and the Church, ideally, would be functioning on many different levels at once. At the same time the Church is not merely an institution or organisation but a tradition, a mystical body, worldwide fellowship. Perhaps it is easiest to use what are in fact very useful tools in relation to specific and particular tasks, insisting that each has to be balanced by others equally necessary. This can be seen in the light of the scheme of three elements of the Church's life at the beginning of this section. Healing can use models of hospitals where the patient comes in for treatment and is sent out. Fellowship is like a family in which human relations are paramount, where functions change and modify but in which the group is maintained. Service demands a base from which to work, colleagues in the task and sensitivity to the situation.[3]

We have been talking about group behaviour and the necessity for a greater awareness of the way groups work. At the present, however, considerable emphasis is being placed on the use of small groups as a means of deepening personal relationships. Sometimes these are led and have explicit purposes. Others are "encounter groups" usually leaderless and frequently meeting on the assumption that to meet is *per se* intrinsically valuable. Some are properly supervised, others entirely casual. The growth of such groups is obviously connected with the felt need for more significant personal contact in an impersonal world. While it is true that more and more is being understood about human group behaviour and that there is a growing emphasis on group therapy it would be best to enter a caution about the use of such activity. It is obvious that opportunities for real personal relations should be encouraged. It is also true that great benefit can be had from properly run encounter sessions. But it is equally true that a group, as such, only gets out of it what is already there. There is no magical potion. In fact the naked exposure of emotional forces can be positively dangerous and degenerate into "a bad trip". For some people group work can be as much an avoidance of reality as it

can be a means of gaining insight and sensitivity, nor is it necessarily Christian.

> "Such groups may meet important social and psychological need in enabling men and women to relax some of the defences which prevent them from making human contact with one another. But to interpret this experience in one way or another as a redemptive encounter with Christ is to fail to distinguish between flesh and spirit, and thus to promote paganism in the guise of Christianity."[4]

IV.   Community Work

We started from a consideration of community which could be applied to the congregation as such and within the locality in which the congregation is placed. This would suggest that attention ought to be given to another contemporary development which may be of value both for understanding something of what can be done within the Church and also society at large. Community work is an area of social service which has become increasingly popular. The present interest has grown out of reaction to the casework bias of the social worker and the provision of welfare services by the "establishment". More positively there is a concern to use the now accepted truth that the social and physical environment is essential to human health; that it is better to prevent misfortune by community provision than to confine help to the already broken; that there are resources of leadership and social maturity in any human group and that these can and ought to be used. There are at the same time all the weaknesses of an exciting new discovery: naive enthusiasm and belief in what can be achieved, confusion as to the aims, methods and criteria and a certain arrogance not least connected with the left wing political hopes that are associated with it.

There are, in fact, a number of types of community work ranging from the social club to the self-help commune, which reminds us that community work is no new phenomenon even if now the emphases have changed. "Community provision" is the provision of organisations or facilities designed to facilitate community growth, both from statutory and voluntary bodies, e.g. community centres, youth clubs, information services. More recently "community workers" have been appointed to work in a more or less unstructured way to enable need to be identified and schemes organised. This is really "community development" though there is some tension between those whose responsibilities are to an organisation such as the council and the real freelance community worker that can freely identify himself with the local people. For some the latter is the only true community worker. It is obvious that on such a basis community development must always be on the edge of political involvement since social structures are involved with power and interests. Usually, especially when understood as a necessary part of community work, this is "community action". All the time, ideally, "community leaders" are drawn from the people

involved and decision making follows democratic procedures. "Community organisation" is the development of those structures of participation and decision making that are necessary in an area, such as "community associations" or action groups.

It would appear that for a number of reasons the Churches must take note of this movement. First churches are, as organised groups within a local community, for good or ill, part of the community structure. Moreover, they are regarded as significant partly because often they are the most active body of people around and because they symbolically represent certain hopes and ideals. The tragedy is that too often, especially in twilight areas, they are a ghetto in the community. But the fact that so often appeals are made to them to be agents for various activities, collecting money, providing accommodation, etc., suggests the opportunity available. Christians, willy-nilly, therefore, are community leaders and have a responsibility to their locality, however they eventually understand their role.

Secondly, community development theory chimes in with the understanding of the Church at two points. Baptists stress the "fellowship of believers", seeing the life of the congregation as a corporate responsibility. Community action is meant to break down apathy, introspection, fear, to release the energy of the people for corporate ends. Secondly, we have begun to learn that the witness of the Church in the wider community is to point to the reality of Christ in the midst. Conversion is not to make conformists, but to enable men and women to live for Christ in their own world. Community development concepts may be very useful in understanding how to be a catalyst, stimulating spiritual as much as social development. Indigenous Churches are as important in our own society as elsewhere in the world.[5]

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

[1] The author, by a slip of the pen, referred in the title of the first article of this series to "the Social Services" instead of "the Social Sciences".
[2] (i) The nature of community:
R. E. Pahl, *Patterns of Urban Life* (Longmans, London, 1970) chap. 7.
F. Toennies, *Community and Association* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1955).
R. Koenig, *The Community* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1955).
M. R. Stein, *The Eclipse of Community* (Harper, New York, 1960).
(ii) Church as an institution:
Joan Brothers, *Religious Institutions* (Longmans, London, 1971).
[3] (i) This whole area is sketched in:
C. L. Mitton, *The Social Sciences and the Churches* (T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1972) Part I.
c.f. M. Argyle, *Religious Behaviour* (London, 1959).
(ii) On the Church as healing community:
R. A. Lambourne, *Community, Church and Healing* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1963).
M. Wilson, *The Church in Healing* (S.C.M., London, 1966).
(iii) *Group behaviour and groupwork:*
W. R. Bion, *Experience in Groups* (Tavistock, London, 1961).
J. Klein, *Working with Groups* (Hutchinson, London, 1961).
W. H. J. Sprott, *Human Groups* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1958).

S. H. Foulkes and E. J. Authary, *Group Psychotherapy* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1957)
F. Milson, *An Introduction to Groupwork Skills* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1973).
(iv) Management theory and the Churches:
P. Rudge, *Management and Ministry* (Tavistock, London, 1968).
W. E. Beveridge, *Managing the Church* (S.C.M., London, 1971).
(v) Industrial theory:
M. Ivens, *Industry and Values* (Harrap, London, 1970).
(vi) On abuse of emotions:
R. M. Enroth *et al., The Story of the Jesus People* (Paternoster, Exeter, 1972).
G. W. Target, *Evangelism Inc.* (Allen Lane, Harmondsworth, 1968).
    ⁴ Quoted from B. W. M. Palmer in Mitton, see above note 2(i), p. 25.
For an expression of this feeling after new human communication:
Sam Keen, *To a Dancing God* (Fontana, London, 1971).
John Killinger, *Leave it to the Spirit* (S.C.M., London, 1971).
Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake* (Sheldon, London, 1973).
    ⁵ (i) On the nature of community work:
W. N. and W. R. Biddle, *The Community Development Process* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Newport, 1965).
R. A. Leaper, *Community Work* (National Council of Social Service, London, 1971).
R. Clark, *Working with Communities* (N.C.S.S., London, 1963).
F. Milson, *An Introduction to Community Work* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1974).
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Reports:
Community work and social change (Longmans, London, 1968).
Current issues in Community work (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1973).
(ii) Community work skills:
T. R. Batten, *Training for Community Development* (O.U.P. Oxford, 1962).
T. R. Batten, *The Human Factor in Community Work* (O.U.P. Oxford, 1965).
T. R. Batten, *The Nondirective approach in group and community work* (O.U.P., Oxford, 1967).
G. Goetschius, *Working with Community Groups* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1968).
(iii) Implications for the Church.
F. Milson, *Church, Youth and Community Development* (Epworth, London, 1970).
G. Lovell, *The Church and Community Development* (The Grail, Harrow, 1972).
Robert Holman, *Power for the Powerless—the Role of Community Action* (Community and Race Relations Unit, B.C.C., London, n.d.).
Anne Power, *I woke up this morning*—the development of a London community project (C.R.R.U., B.C.C., London, n.d.).

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INFORMATION PLEASE

Information is required concerning the whereabouts of the records of the Midland Association from 1768 onwards. The manuscript minutes for 1733-1767 are available for inspection in the Birmingham Central Reference Library (Catalogue 497348). The Library also holds a bound collection of Circular Letters from Annual Associations for 1783 and from 1799-1830 (reference L.18.2). Advice on this query would be appreciated by Rev. C. S. Hall, 5, Bank Farm Close, Pedmore, Stourbridge, DY9 0TT.