

Renewal of the Church in the City

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Published by the Appalachian Peoples Service Organization

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Published by APSO, January 1980

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The Rt. Rev. Wesley Frensdorff is the Bishop of Nevada. He has written a number of articles on ministry and is much in demand as a speaker on the subject. In this paper he suggests that the church's recent experience in developing new forms of ministry in rural and small town churches, may point the way to the renewal of the urban church. The key is indigenous ministry. And that means local ownership, control and support.

RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH IN THE CITY

Among the several items on the agenda of the February Episcopal Urban Caucus Assembly is the renewal of the church in the city. Our experience in dioceses which are rural/small town, and whose urban areas are relatively new, may not offer much insight in addressing the serious social, economic and political issues of the inner city. There is, however, good reason to believe that our experience in ministry development might contribute significantly to the church renewal portion of our church's urban strategy. Only if the Church, as a gathered, worshipping, ministering community, is a significant part of the life of the people of the city, will she be able to have a significant share in the renewal and re-building of the city itself. Only a congregation present and alive -- locally -- can witness effectively -- through its worship, its life, its ministries -- to God's great love to the people of its community. Then, also, together with the church elsewhere, she can engage the various issues related to social change.

For the Church to be vital, alive and truly "present" in the city, it must be "owned" by the people of the city. It is my conviction that our traditional models of church life (ministry, organization and decision-making) are too hierarchical,

too money dependent, and too centered on highly educated, professional, stipendiary clergy who normally come from the middle and upper classes. It is these models and these dependencies which unnecessarily prevent effective renewal in life, ministry and mission.

My limited comprehension of liberation theology leads me to understand both "presence" and "ownership" as related to "control". Ownership and control are inter-related; two sides of the same coin. They are essential to "presence". Hugh White has said: ". . . people who own have control". (JSAC Grapevine, October 1979). It appears to me that, together with the host of other problems, the church in the city must deal with the problems related to "indigenization"; and, as such, they are not so different from similar problems faced by the church in a variety of cultures and ethnic situations.

Among the recommendations resulting from the Urban hearings sponsored by the Urban Bishop's Coalition, we read:

"We must be willing to choose a new kind of presence in the cities which call less for money than for personal involvement in the struggles of the poor We must decide to be present in the cities wherever the poor are struggling to be free and not just in discreet 'church' programs and operations." (To Hear and to Heed, page 52.)

also:

"In a dramatically surprising way, the most urgent plea to the church presented by those who spoke as or on behalf of the cities was not for money, but for the church's presence and involvement in their struggle."

"The effort to raise massive sums of new income leads to the assumption that nothing can be done until that income is raised. The evidence presented at the Hearings is clearly that additional funds may well prove to be needed, but much more can be done now with existing resources if the church will change its sense of priorities, its style of operation, and its basic commitments." (Page 55, underlining mine.)

In the 1920's, having served for eight years in China and subsequently studying Anglican missionary methods, Roland Allen, an English priest wrote:

"We constantly hear men use these three terms, self-support, self-extension, self-government as if they were distinct and separate things . . . they cannot be rightly so treated . . . thus self-support and self-government are closely knit. As for self-extension, it is surely plain that a church which could neither support itself nor govern itself could not multiply itself. Thus self-extension is bound up with self-support and self-government: these three are intimately united." (Pages 26-27, The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church, Eerdmans, 1962.)

Is there a relationship between these assertions and Roland Allen's conclusions? The common denominator is the incarnation -- our Lord Jesus, fully "present" in and through the Church, His Body, indigenous in place, time and culture, among the people who are its life, who exercise its ministry, and who carry out its mission.

The rather ambitious proposals of the Urban Bishop's Coalition, contained in "The Challenge for Evangelism and Mission", target some very important issues which seek to deal with the complex underlying causes of many of our social ills. Past experience makes it a bit difficult to gather much optimism for the funding of these proposals. However, as "To Hear and to Heed" has pointed out, there's much to do that does not require money, though it will require basic changes in the way we do ministry, call and train persons to Holy Orders, and model our life for leadership and decision-making. Our traditional, suburban, middle class models are no longer adequate for the Church in the city to be truly indigenous. Herein lies a significant part of the challenge to evangelism and mission.

Is not much of our present paralysis in the inner city due to our lack of real identification with the people who are there? There are many aspects of the crisis of the cities. Most of these are beyond the Church's ability to shape and change. But questions of indigenization, i. e., presence and identification, can be faced.

"A pivotal issue which relates to the church's stake in the city is the question of identification. To what extent is the Episcopal Church willing to identify the people of the cities as its people? The Episcopal Church moved toward the suburbs in the 50's and 60's because that was where 'its people' were present in ever increasing numbers. This exodus left the cities inhabited by people that the Episcopal Church has never identified as 'its people'." (Page 47, To Hear and to Heed.)

If our Church is to participate in both the pain, as well as the opportunities for renewal of the city, this withdrawal has to be reversed by engagement and identification with the cities' people. So far our Church has not been able, significantly, to deal with this problem.

Roland Allen concluded that the Anglican Communion -- contrary to St. Paul's methods -- had saddled its "missions" with methods of life, ministry or organization which were foreign to their situation and culture, resulted in a paralyzing dependency, and kept the Church deprived of the very sacraments which are its lifeblood.

In our concern for the renewal and re-vitalization of the Church in the city we do well to consider some of these same matters. A truly indigenous Church, Roland Allen pointed out, must be truly self-governing. It must "own" and "control". The conclusions of the urban hearings point in the same direction.

"We must decide to be involved as a servant church which recognizes the priority and authority of the people it seeks to serve. As a servant church, we must listen and must be directed by the voice of the Lord as expressed by the poor and concede to them a decisive role in the determination of the priorities, program and shape of the church's life and expenditures." (Page 51, To Hear and to Heed.)

To be indigenous, to own and control, requires more than self-government. It also requires self-support. It involves autonomy, not in the sense of isolation, but in the sense of being responsible, or response-able. Autonomy, in my mind, is not mere independence. It is to be capable of inter-dependence. "Autonomous" means having a strong sense of identity, purpose and ownership with the will and ability to act, and to act inter-dependently. A dependent person cannot be effectively inter-dependent; neither can a dependent congregation. However, our model for autonomous (in the above sense) congregational life -- a Parish we call it -- is based on having sufficient money to support buildings, diocese, and stipendiary clergy. As such, the model guarantees dependence on outside support for virtually every inner city congregation, as it does for small rural ones.

Real indigenization, with effective self-government and self-support, will require some radical changes if the church in people-poor or poor people areas is to be set free to become autonomous and indigenous.

Can we, however, change those models which are basically hierarchical and dependent on professional, stipendiary clergy? I believe we can. Can we

set the church free for renewal in ministry and local responsibility, without doing violence to our ecclesiology or to our theology of Holy Orders? I believe we can. Our problems are not theological; they are organizational. I believe our situation is the result -- for a variety of understandable historical reasons -- of attaching too many functions of ministry to those who exercise the ordained offices, and of "locking up" the sacraments largely in professional clergy. This has placed the church in a ministerial and sacramental captivity. As a result the local church is usually seen as a community gathered around a minister, rather than as a ministering community, and the life-giving sacraments are made dependent on the payment of stipends.

We can come out of these captivities to new life and mission to rebuild both "the temple" and the city. That, however, will require more radical changes than merely pouring new sums of money into old wineskins, or patching up the old garments. The Church has to become a part of the people it is serving in such a way that they carry out the ministries essential for their life and mission, as well as to raise up from among them priests and deacons. Together then, as a eucharistic servant community, in the name of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they will minister and witness to their neighbors and together with the rest of the Church shape the life of the city and call for justice and equality.

Sixty years later, the principles Roland Allen set forth as basic New Testament principles are receiving some application and testing in this country and elsewhere in the world. What we call the TOTAL MINISTRY PROGRAM in Nevada is based, at least in part, on some of these principles: the Church must be fully indigenous; it is a ministering community in which every member shares, potentially; every disciple has received gifts for ministry which he or she is called to offer in the life and mission of the Church; the offices of priest and deacon can be filled by persons identified and called by and from the congregation and trained to serve in its midst without lengthy professional education; oversight and training opportunities for all members are provided by the diocese as the inter-link between congregations and as the basic resource center.

Canon III, 8, was originally intended to make sacraments available on a regular basis for special places and situations. Even its limited use in several dioceses has taught us many things. The most important of these is that unless it is used as part of a TOTAL MINISTRY MODEL, as outlined above, it is merely a lesser, cheap version of the old clergy-dominated, money-dependent ministry model. However, once the Church is understood as a ministering community in which each member offers his or her gifts in mutual service, both within the life

of the Church and in her mission of witness and service, then the ordained offices of priest and deacon can take their special place in a different and vital way.

Let us look at those Churches which have been able to identify with the poor and with the minorities. They have much to teach us. What makes them really indigenous? Perhaps, finally, we'll have to conclude that we cannot adjust our ethos, our religious history and culture, sufficiently to become truly indigenous to the people of the city. But in order to give it a real try, we'll have to go far beyond merely shoring up -- with increasingly shrunken funds -- the old ways of doing things.

In a stimulating article published in the Los Angeles diocesan paper in September 1979, the Rev. Charles Belknap points out that we have many marginal parishes because an economically stable parish with one employed priest costs \$50,000 per year, while one priest attracts, on the average, a congregation of 160 adults. That requires better than average stewardship from an average upper middle class parish, so it is impossible for a congregation in an economically depressed area. So what are we doing with this heart-sick patient, he asks. Either we give periodic transfusions (support grants) or we prescribe limited activity (part-time clergy) or we do a coronary by-pass (rent the facilities) or we slowly squeeze the turnip to death. Father Belknap concludes his analysis with a call to redesign the heart, ". . . to find new ways to be the Church in the urban areas". Right on!!

If nothing else, economics will force us to take a second look at our mission strategy. The future will bring either inflation or depression, the economists tell us. All institutions which are based on voluntary funding will need to face this truth. From past experience it is safe to say that no appeal will result in sufficient sustained funding to make a significant difference. If the primary strategy of a renewed urban program is based on "money" we are likely to fail before we start.

"New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth". (Hymn 519.) The laos, the people of God, has within itself all the gifts needed for ministry both for the life and worship of the church and for her mission. "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." (I Peter 4:10.)

Once we depend more fully on these gifts, build the self-confidence of the people and provide them with opportunities for ministerial education and training, we will discover the many hidden talents, too long buried, that are present in every congregation no matter of what size.

In New Testament terms, there is almost no cell of the church too small to be sufficient in ministry for its own life and mission. We ought to be able to take any nucleus of committed, somewhat experienced disciples and through support and training enable them for their mission in their place, "to equip the saints for the work of ministry". (Ephesians 4:12.) They ought not to be dependent and paralyzed by those models which come from another time and place, and which may still be appropriate and effective in many places and situations . . . but not in all.

For the Church in the inner city to become "present", to be "owned" and "controlled", and thus empowered for mission, we need first to set it free to become fully indigenous in the life and culture of the people where they are. This calls for change -- not small change -- not really big money either -- but radical change in our understanding and modeling of ministry and the place of Holy Orders within the ministering community.