

IT'S TIME TO "ROCK THE BOAT"!

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Parish life in our diocese reflects to an alarming degree the racism characteristic of our society. Out of our 94 parishes and missions, only seven or eight have any appreciable degree of interracial fellowship. Of course, many of our congregations are in geographic areas that are predominantly, or entirely, white or black; yet even so at least 30 congregations ought to have considerable numbers of both whites and blacks if they came close to representing the racial balance of their neighborhoods. In addition, those blacks who do attend "integrated" parishes are not usually represented in vestries, committees, and leadership positions in proportion to their attendance at worship. We have known situations where blacks were "welcomed" as long as they simply sat in pews and made financial contributions - but were roundly resented if they tried to offer their talents in the choir or as ushers or in any way really acted like people! The fact is that even in many parishes that honestly intend to be "friendly" the members of minority groups are still second class citizens.

In this situation it is shocking that only about half the parishes in racially mixed neighborhoods have any sort of strategy aimed at achieving racial inclusiveness. Of the 52 respondents to a recent questionnaire sent out by the Interracial Task Force, only 26 said they had any long range plans at all, let alone efforts to overcome racial prejudice in the congregation or movements to become effectively involved in community life. Only 23 had included the study of race problems and other social issues in their education programs in the past five years. The rest are apparently drifting with regard to one of the most crucial dilemmas of our time.

It seems likely that few parish leaders consciously intend to perpetuate a system of discrimination and separatism. Yet the fact is that in most instances no positive steps are being taken to develop a climate of genuine openness toward all men - an openness which is just as important to spiritual health even in a parish where there are at present no minority group persons in the neighborhood! Does not this lack of caring reflect a perhaps unconscious racial bias in favor of "our own

kind"? It may not rest on an ideology that intends to declare whites superior; but at least it shows a distressing willingness to acquiesce in the present divisions of society. In many ways - employment practices, placement of diocesan missions, the use of educational materials with a predominantly white, middle-class image, to name only a few - we unthinkingly perpetuate patterns that favor one racial group over another. We are unwilling to challenge or examine the power structure of parish life, partly because we are afraid to "rock the boat" and partly because we are simply unaware of the problem! This is what is often called "institutional racism" and goes far deeper than we would like to think. In one survey, six out of ten white parishes responding to a question about employment policy felt that "we cannot consider employing a black rector if the congregation is mainly white." No doubt the negative percentage would be much higher from the diocese as a whole. Surely this indicates that we are not yet mature enough to see people as people and that we have a serious racial problem.

Nevertheless, we do not need to acquiesce in the present situation of stalemate and complacency. It has been demonstrated in many congregations of all denominations in this city that wherever a vigorous leadership is willing to take some risks because of their obedience to Christ, dramatic changes can occur which may bring a whole new sense of mission and joy and power to parish life. Controversial issues become the arena for soul searching and honest debate, and the Church becomes a center for renewal in the life of the world. If we are serious about all this, there are many resources available in this metropolitan area. The Christian Education arm of our diocese has a skilled consultation service ready to help any parish take a look at its life and ministry and search out new ways ahead. The Metropolitan Ecumenical Training Center has a program called "Race Relations Problem Solving", which has been tested this spring with both industrial and church groups. Participants have discovered the surprising persistence of discriminatory practices in their institutions and have made effective decisions to change. They have also learned much about themselves as persons.

Each of us as individuals can raise the claims of justice at vestry meetings and other parish gatherings and urge our own leaders to develop a strategy by which we may become aware that social issues are an indispensable part of the Gospel. Then we may act out the meaning of Christ's love in a fellowship transcending all human barriers. The time is late. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear!"