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The call of the country
church

THE CALL OF
THE COUNTRY CHURCH



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The Claims and Opportunities
of the Christian Ministry

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THE CALL OF THE COUNTRY CHURCH

By ARTHUR STEPHEN HOYT

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THE CALL OF THE COUNTRY CHURCH

The country church offers a field of special importance. In the country the family, the very unit of society, is felt to be more sacred, the ties are stronger, and there is chance for more distinct and consistent training. Life lies open to the sun and to the eyes of men, and the very forces of nature teach the democracy of honest toil. Custom and public opinion are not so sharp and arbitrary and men grow independent in judgment and action. They are thrown upon their own resources and they have the flavor of individuality. Men know each other and have kindly interest in each other and the expression of sympathy is natural and spontaneous. And these qualities of individual worth and social stability have been largely trained by the influences of the country church. Religion has quickened and sanctified these natural forces of country life.

The church, from the beginning, has been pecu-

liarily the centre of the community. The minister has been able to know men individually, to be a friend to each person in his parish, to touch them the most vitally, actually to have the moulding of character, without the manifold distractions and opposing forces of the city. And from country churches have gone forth the leading men and women of the nation. A single country church of Central New York in a single generation sent seven of its sons into the ministry, and a score of capable and energetic laymen to strengthen the life of as many city churches.

The country church offers a field of special need. Country life has changed greatly in the memory of living men, in all the older states, and the same forces are now working in the Middle West. There has been an unmistakable loss of unity, both social and religious. Invention applied to agriculture has released three men out of four on the farm, and they have followed the gravitation to the city or to newer lands. The young, the ambitious have often gone, leaving the aged, the less progressive, and the ne'er-do-wells. With the loss of population have been the depreciation of farm values and the increase of tenant farms and large farms. Foreigners have partly

taken the place of the native stock. There has been a loss of social power in these rapid changes of country life.

These changes have affected the country church. The average rural congregation is smaller than a generation ago. Through the loss of old families, the church is left with crippled means and finds a growing difficulty in settling a well-trained man. So a stable ministry, with its pervasive and unifying influence, has often yielded to a transient or at most a yearly supply, of necessity, brief and superficial in effect. Sectarian rivalries add to the difficulty of the country problem. Churches that once had a fair field now struggle for life and they are tempted to think of their own life more than their ministry to the Kingdom of God. And many communities are suffering a spiritual lapse because three or four feeble churches are competitors in the same field in the place of a single, comprehensive church, its members self-reverencing and reverencing each.

And then the country church faces the fact of the unchurched masses, the foreigners who have taken possession of the old farms, and the lapsed Americans of Christian ancestry. The frontiers are every-

where, not alone in new states, but close about many old centres. A newly installed country pastor of Central New York recently found forty-seven families, chiefly American, within three miles of his church, without religious convictions or habits. The case of Middleboro, Massachusetts, is not unlike that of many other townships, fifteen churches representing eight denominations, and two thirds of the population without affiliation with any of the churches. It is a moderate estimate to say that one fourth of our country population is today beyond the direct influence of the Church, a greater aggregate than the pagans of our cities.

The country church has been extremely conservative both in teachings and methods. It has not adapted itself to the changed social needs, and has suffered other agencies, as the grange and the lodge, to usurp its place of leadership. As means of instruction have increased, the pulpit has not kept its intellectual position. Its teachings have not frankly met the new light on the problems of nature and life. The church has depended too much upon spasmodic revivals and not on daily ministrations; it has drawn false distinctions in life by hard and fast rules, and

not dwelt upon the great principles of the Gospel. These tendencies have acted with the natural economic and social changes for a partial decline of the country church.

The problem of rural life must be of serious import to all Christian patriots. Religion is the cohesive force of society. The frontiers of any country are its weakest places morally, and its most dangerous characters are there. The isolation of the country tends to develop forceful characters for good or ill. "Isolation," said Burke, "is the mother of barbarism." The recovery and development of country life is the problem. American Christianity may have its hardest task in imparting recuperative force to its partially spent communities.

What sort of a man should answer the call of the country church? He should be a man who loves the out-door world, who loves its freedom and beauty and growth. If he finds recreation with rod or gun all the better; anything that takes him far afield will give him the sense of kinship with nature. It will keep his body strong and his mind sane, and he will find some of his best sermons in the fields, for he will hear the Master speak as He did in the cornfields.

He should be a man who has deep human interest, who can see true human worth behind rough faces and hard conditions. He must be one who tries to make friends, who knows each member of his parish, who concerns himself with all that touches their life. He should know the work of the country and not be afraid to take a hand; a distant, clerical garbed, kid-gloved ministry is peculiarly a misfit in the simplicity and freedom of country life.

As a preacher, he should have the teacher's gift and make the most of the teaching ministry. Country people can appreciate good preaching and in the past have had their share of it. But the preacher is the teacher far more than the orator. And the pastor in the country where there are fewer agencies of education than in the city, owes it to his people to make his pulpit instructive and to make the life of the church, not only a religious force, but a means of intellectual and social culture.

He should be a man who has the missionary spirit, who shall make his little church feel itself a vital part of the Kingdom, who shall help to the largeness of mind and life that comes from the sense of contact with the world. And like the true shepherd, he

should seek the wandering and scattered sheep, and carry the word to every person of the community.

And finally he should be a man with the social consciousness. It is significant that a country church of Iowa recently asked for a man who had the training of a social settlement. Dr. W. H. Jordan, director of the New York Agricultural Experiment Station at Geneva, says that he would have every country pastor take at least one year in an agricultural college. Both are significant of the fact that life is organic and that the whole life is to be understood and helped. Social methods are just as necessary and helpful to the country church as to the one in the city. The man with a sense of pure neighborliness, patience to understand conditions, love that will serve all the sides of human life and will make the Gospel touch every side and province of man's nature, will find the country church a field of never-ending interest, and one that demands and repays the very best that he can give.

