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THE COUNTRY CHURCH

vol. 2



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THE Gospel of the Kingdom

STUDIES IN SOCIAL REFORM AND WHAT TO DO

JOSIAH STRONG, D.D., Editor

Under the Direction of a National Committee

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WHAT TO DO

WE present a valuable article on the Country Church and Social Service, by Rev. George F. Wells, B.D., the Research Assistant in the office of the National Federation of Churches, and also of the Department of Christian Sociology in Drew Theological Seminary. Mr. Wells while pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Lincoln, Vt., became pastor of two other churches in the town federated with his own and then united the two churches into one church of a denomination on which they could agree, though different from the denomination of either of them, or of Mr. Wells himself. Mr. Wells remained pastor of this Union work for two years, and saw the whole community improved in many ways, and the church membership nearly doubled. Mr. Wells is still young and will be heard from. An article by such a man is worth reading.

THE COUNTRY CHURCH AND SOCIAL SERVICE

REV. GEORGE FREDERICK WELLS, B.D.

THE country community is comparatively simple and easy of mastery. It does not require a great man radically to transform the average village and its dependent neighborhoods. The country minister, above all others, is given the opportunity of becoming a social engineer. Yet how often is he such? How much longer must we point back to Charles Kingsley and John Frederic Oberlin as the greatest workers among rural community builders?

In seeking for practical programs of social service which country churches may adopt, I first present a program for the total services of such churches.

1. Every country church should, first of all, secure a strong, skilful, and energetic minister for the preaching of the gospel and the inspiration and leadership of the community through pastoral visitation, the administration of the church, and the executive direction of religious education.

2. Where country churches are related to other churches in the same community, each church should practise some method of Christian unity whereby the comity, cooperation, federation, or organic union of the churches shall be gained.

3. Where authoritative and generally accepted knowledge of the needy conditions of a parish is lacking, a thorough scientific canvas and investigation should be made.

4. Where worship, personal devotion, edifying religious exercises, and missionary endeavor are displaced by pleasures and practises of evident demoralizing effect a campaign of evangelism, personal, educational, or revivalistic, is needed.

5. Where the churches, single or federated, are not in vital and helpful relation to the

other social institutions of the parish so that symmetrical development is realized, an enterprise in the federation of rural social forces should be initiated.

6. In instances where the common social agencies and institutions of a community are not fulfilling their functions, and can not by direct means be stimulated to accomplish them, the church may temporarily and in behalf of needy classes perform these functions by so-called institutional agencies.

7. In the face of special problems the method of ministerial supplementation may be used in securing the aid of specialists to treat these conditions.

The statement of this inclusive program for the country church has done for us at least one thing. It shows us what not to do. The selection of essential programs is nearly half the task. It is the country pastor's privilege to give his Sunday-morning services to the greatest truths of the Kingdom of which he is capable, the Sunday-evening services to evangelism, or to the active interests of his church, while social service becomes the church's every-day work. Close lines can never be drawn between the social and spiritual services of Christians. All ministry is Christian. The spiritual problem of society is the social problem of the church. The best and only real solution of social problems is the eradication of their causes. I have seen many a rural problem of drunkenness, poverty, social vice, and gambling solved by making clean, honest men and women of the offenders. "Twice-born men" are to be found in country villages as well as in the slums of London. The large number of organized forms of social services which the churches of a community may exhibit

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does not indicate a high and healthy state of social life in that community. Neither does it indicate a rapid rate of social progress. It usually marks the reverse, a state of need—of degeneracy or misdirection. The truest social mission of the church for which specific programs may be sought is that of directing the activities of Christian people in behalf of other people. There are surely countless problems in country communities to-day to which both pastors and churches may well address themselves.

Having gained a general idea of the relations and motives of social service as a means whereby the country minister may, through his church, become the master of his community, we will notice four leading examples of socialized country churches. From these, the one who desires may catalog more than a score of workable plans which may respond to his own local needs. But we care more to make the strongest possible emphasis upon the cardinal principles which, if practised, promise success in all such undertakings.

"The Letters and Memories of Charles Kingsley" is one of the best books ever written in regard to country-church problems. Charles Kingsley will sometime be given full honor as a country minister. Let us note what he did in his first months in Eversley parish, England, early in his remarkable career:

"New clubs for the poor, a shoe club, coal club, maternal society, a loan fund, and lending library were established one after another. An intelligent young parishioner, who was till lately schoolmaster, was sent by the rector to Winchester Training College; an adult evening-school was held in the rectory all the winter months; a Sunday-school met there every Sunday morning and afternoon; and weekly cottage lectures were established in the outlying districts for the old and feeble. At the beginning of his ministry there was scarcely a grown-up man or woman among the laboring class who could read or write—for as boys and girls they had all been glad to escape early to field work from the one school—a stifling room ten feet square, where cobbling shoes, teaching, and caning went on together." ("Works of Charles Kingsley," Vol. VII. Letters and Memories. Morris & Co., Philadelphia, 1899, page 98.)

The story of John Frederic Oberlin's masterly experience is strikingly similar. Oberlin found the Ban-de-la-Roche, a whole township with five small villages, destitute

of schools, roads, manufactures, artisans, and agriculture, as well as morally and religiously backward.*

He first established schools. Then he built roads, himself taking pickax in hand and attacking the rugged hills. He organized a club for the study of agriculture, introduced new vegetables, investigated soil conditions, and furnished lectures on fertilizers, drainage, and irrigation. He had a workshop equipped with turning-lathe, carpenter's outfit, printing-press, and book-bindery. He trained shoemakers, blacksmiths, and carpenters. He provided women as well as men with productive employment. He promoted all this social work as a means of expressing his own religious vitality and power, and as an essential step in the successful building of a Christian community.

For the third example, we are taken to the decadent mountain township of Lincoln, Vt. Five years ago three church societies united under one pastor in what was called the Federated Churches. The Ladies' Aid and Good Templars' Hall was the parish-house. It was the home of the Grange, of the Good Templars' Lodge, the Grand Army Post, the village library, the Y. M. C. A., the church prayer-meetings, and all the leading social entertainments and lectures of the church and community. The Federated Churches, the schools, and the Grange were in active co-operation. Lincoln's First Farmers' Institute, under the direction of the State Board of Agriculture, was a result of their cooperation. From the pastor's leadership through the same centralized movement, young men graduated from the Dairy School of the State Agricultural College, the public schools were stimulated to higher standards, the Y. M. C. A. and its baseball team were organized, and home-talent plays afforded the most wholesome popular entertainments which the community had known in years. Religious enterprises were always predominant. One year of the work saw church attendance increased forty per cent., more than a score of baptisms, church membership nearly doubled, and the largest gatherings of the people always those upon purely religious occasions. The moral forces of the community were radically changed. In response to the growth of local possibilities two of the churches became one by organic union, and

*The reader is referred to A. S. Beard's biography of Oberlin. Pilgrim Press, 1909.

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the two resulting churches continued to cooperate in touching the whole changing life of the 1,000 people in the township. The community to-day is a paradise compared to former conditions, and the work, tho still under test, is moving forward.

Social life and organization are different now from those in the days of Oberlin and Kingsley. Social conditions with which country churches have to deal differ in the various parts of the United States. For this reason our fourth illustration is an instance from the Middle West.

The Rev. Charles S. Lyles is pastor of a country church in the farming community of Lovington, Ill. The township has about 1,400 people. In two years he brought his Sunday-school from an enrolment of 100 and an average attendance of 45 to an enrolled membership of 404 and an average attendance of 216. The pastor began by using the stereopticon in the Sunday-school and church as a means of directing inspiring congregational singing, of illustrating the Sunday-school lesson, and of lectures on missions. It was made a special feature in an extensive program of concerts and lectures upon all phases of practical agriculture, education, and community life. The preparation for the lectures, as well as the lectures themselves, brought him into living touch with all the community leaders, who, catching his moral enthusiasm, were glad to cooperate with him in promoting the spiritual as well as the material welfare of the parish. The pastor has a boys' club, the members of which he directs in solving various problems in community service. Lecture hall, reading-room, dining-hall, and kitchen, as well as gymnasium with shower baths for these activities are provided in the large basement of the church. The lady teachers of the public schools lead the girls of the church in gymnasium and practical service classes. Mr. Lyle's church, which is both institutional and cooperative, furnishes a living example of the fact that even the powerful forces which operate to-day in rural life respond cheerfully to a powerful leadership in the country church.

By way of summary and conclusion I wish to give several well-considered hints as to available programs of social service by country churches.

1. The bringing of country churches, where two or more of them exist in the same neighborhood, to a condition of courteous

cooperation or union forms a normal program in social service. The conservation of religious social forces is certainly a social service. It is well that so many parishes have but one church each. It is certainly not encouraging that the missionary treasuries of the denominations in the little State of Vermont, for instance, can be conservatively estimated to appropriate \$8,000 per year, and New York State from like sources \$25,000 per year, in the support of rival interests in church-burdened parishes. The recognition of this as a disease which they can only slowly heal is the redeeming feature. No local church need adopt any particular program of social service until it has gained such union with neighboring churches as shall make it really effective in behalf of an undivided community.

2. The country church may gain and give its constituency education in the science and history of social service. The program in this regard may consist of three things: these are the library, the study class, and lectures by experts on social service in general and rural social service in particular. In preparing for definite programs of social service the leaders in the country church should especially study the two cardinal methods in the application of social service. In the institutional forms of work the church proceeds directly to organize agencies to gain desired results. In the cooperative forms of work, that is, in the federation of rural social forces, the church works indirectly. The church gets its men to accomplish the direct ends through agencies and organizations already existing. In general in country places the churches may much more safely and effectively observe the latter method. The highest standard is reached when the great principle of unity is observed and each fundamental social institution performs the largest number of functions.

3. It may often occur that the centralization of the public schools, a task which the country church may undertake, at least indirectly, may not only solve the community's educational problem, but its church problem also. Mr. R. R. Bone, in *The Assembly Herald* of September, 1910, tells how in Rock Creek, Ill., the various small schools were brought into one graded school with a full high-school course. This made the rural point, five miles from the nearest town, a desirable place in which to live. Its exodus

of families well able to support the church ceased. It became possible to secure a high grade of preachers. And thus the reconstruction of the country school, undertaken by those who earnestly sought the solution of the problem of a declining church, became the key to true rural progress.

4. The village problem of child idleness may be solved by the church. There are hundreds of thousands of village boys in America who, through idle loafing in country stores, blacksmith shops, barber shops, stables, railroad stations, country hotels, and in the streets generally, and with no adequate sense nor program of responsibility, but living instead on the atmosphere of filthy conversation and associations, develop into third-rate men, if not into the criminal and dependent classes of society. The condition among girls, due to the same deficiencies of home life, is hardly better. There are too many hamlets and country towns which can not boast a single boy of eighteen years who is not subject to some vicious habit which will cripple his character forever. If the church could bring the home and the school life up to their normal functions this problem would be solved. But surely in this time of boys' groups under trained leadership, the various boys' clubs, and especially of the Boy Scouts of America, the difficulty should speedily disappear.

5. The country church may solve the problem of demoralized rural sports. The forces of evil have taken possession of too many "gangs" of country boys and young men. The profanity, for instance, which is often complacently tolerated at village baseball games is entirely without excuse. Neither is it excusable that gambling and drinking habits should be associated with the most common of American outdoor games. The village preacher and church should invariably be able to cooperate with the village baseball team to mutual profit. One of the happiest victories of my work as a country pastor has been that of displacing a disreputable gang of would-be players with a strong, clean, and usually victorious Y. M. C. A. team which was the pride of our church and a positive help to the community.

6. The church in the country, as well as in the city, is called upon to undertake the care of public health. It is true that rural health officers are often the most troubled of public servants. The close cooperation of

country ministers with local physicians and health officers is indispensable. The great health movements, such as the anti-tuberculosis movement, for instance, should not so often be given special Sundays as they should be provided for by special week-night lectures. Addresses and practical talks in sex hygiene by local physicians, carefully approved specialists, or by the minister himself should not be neglected.

7. I would propose what might be called a country-life conference. In it the church, grange, and school could cooperate. A Friday afternoon and evening might be given to concerts, exhibitions, and lectures by the local schools and their teachers, and the district, county, or State supervisors of education. The church and the schools should assist, as on Saturday the grange might lead in a township field day with picnic, sports, and addresses by the farmers, the Y. M. C. A., and other organizations, while on Sunday, the church day, the schools and the grange could attend *en masse* special religious services. The leaders of the cooperating denominations, Sunday-schools, and representatives of the Federation movement would be glad for so opportune a hearing.

A conference like this may be able to avail itself of a speaker of national repute. It certainly would afford a community the adequate hearing of many an issue which otherwise could cause no more than a passing ripple. Such a program may give to many a parish its incentive to life and power.

8. A hint has already been given as to the minister's supplementary helpers. Through them he is to answer the question of complete community mastery. State secretaries and specialists can not react with sufficient force and continuity to bring the desired reconstruction. The county unit for expert supervision is the present demand. The time is at hand when thousands of rural counties in America are to be manned with engineers in every phase of betterment. The Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America in providing county federations of churches has the clue to the situation. One of the most necessary programs of social and community service which the country ministers of America can adopt is that of special preparation for this new grasp upon social forces, which promises that the whole nation shall soon rise to its own upon the base of a socialized and Christianized rural character.





