

The
Community
Church
in a
College
Center

By

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DEMERITT HALL—NEW HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE



THE HISTORICAL SETTING: Three years after the Pilgrims had landed at Plymouth, a small band of settlers from old Plymouth likewise seeking religious liberty began to build their fish weirs along the coast near what is now Dover, New Hampshire. By 1640 they had pushed inland as far as the head of salt water on Oyster River. This branch settlement was called Oyster River Plantation. In spite of deprivations of "hostile savages" the new settlement flourished to such an extent that early in the eighteenth century it separated from the mother colony at Dover, and the Oyster River church became the Congregational church in the new town of Durham. The members of this church played a prominent part in the Revolutionary War. When Gen. John Sullivan and his bold men from Durham carried off the gunpowder stored in Fort William and Mary they hid the kegs under the pulpit of the old meeting-house. Later, that same powder saved the day at Bunker Hill, having been carted thither secretly in ox carts. After the war Durham became quite a ship-building center. Ships from the open sea discharged their cargoes at its wharfs. Long ox trains moved in a steady stream along the dusty state road transporting goods to Concord. With the advent of the Boston and Maine Railroad, however, industry and commerce languished. More attention was given to farming and lumbering. At present there are only about a thousand souls in the immediate village and surrounding country. The only church to care for the people is the one founded two hundred years ago.

The Coming of the College: The genius of New England is its devotion to education; the passion to found colleges is in its blood. Durham is no exception to the rule. In 1890 on the death of Benjamin Thompson, a wealthy Durham farmer, it was found that he had left practically his entire estate to the state of New Hampshire on condition that the College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts, then at Hanover, should be moved to Durham and established on his farm of three hundred and eighty acres. The state legislature accepted the bequest and appropriated the necessary money for the first buildings. There were less than sixty in the student body when the college first opened its doors in Durham. From this modest beginning a quarter of a century ago the college has grown into a progressive tax-supported state institution with splendid equipment, a large faculty, experiment station and extension department, and a student body of approximately a thousand boys and girls from all over New England.

The Problem Stated: It was no easy task before the college came to center the life of the town in the church, to preach and practice Christian democracy to such an extent that day laborers and scions of old families, farmers and summer residents, authors and lumberjacks, could meet as brothers in Christ at the house of God. How much more difficult was the task after the college came! Would the "town and gown" spirit make or break the church? Could Episcopalians and Unitarians and Swedenborgians and Friends and Methodists and all the rest "keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace?" How the Pilgrim church, gathered over two centuries ago in the wilderness, is attempting to serve as a real community church in a college center is the purpose of this short sketch.

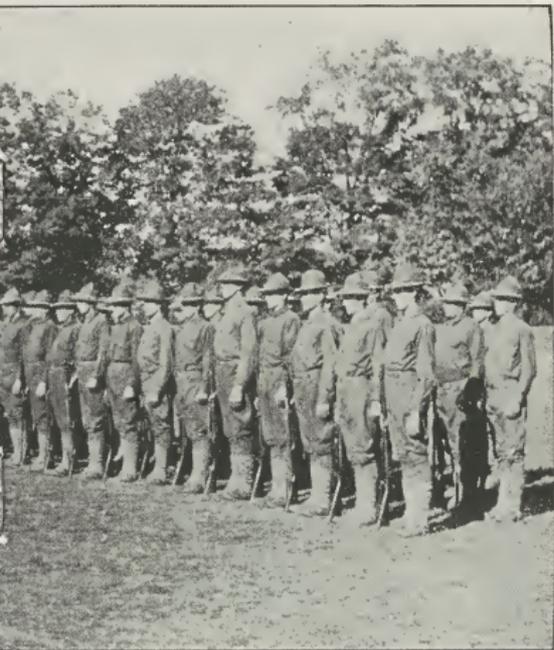
The Church A Student Religious Center: A true community church should meet the needs of the various groups composing the common life. Let us take them up one at a time. What about the students? Do the young men and women who make Durham their home nine months in the year make contact with the old village church? Let us see. There is no daily chapel service on the campus. Once a week convocation is held, but this is more of a forensic exercise than a religious service. This makes the task of the church somewhat easier. Let us consider the routine of an average Sunday if we would see how the students function in the church. In the vestry before morning worship are student Bible classes. Downstairs in the primary rooms several college girls are conducting a kindergarten that village mothers may attend church in peace. At the regular morning service the students are very much in evidence. One-half the congregation is composed of students. Members of the college glee clubs sing in the choir. The ushers are students. During the college year the various fraternity and non-fraternity groups take turns in ushering. The church school meets at the close of the morning service. One-third of the teachers are students. In the afternoon several of the college men start off on a three-mile hike to keep an appointment at a district school house to conduct a Sunday School. If it is winter there is a vesper service in the church auditorium. Probably the college orchestra has charge of the program. Comes evening. Before a crackling fire in the vestry some forty or fifty students are gathered in little groups. They are eating cake and drinking tea and getting acquainted. Suddenly one of their number calls the meeting to order. A few rousing hymns are sung. Then some upper classman makes a short talk on cribbing. For an hour the air is electric with a spirited debate. Generally the pastor or some member of the faculty is present to take part or to sum up the result of the discussion in a few well-pointed sentences. But he is there only by invitation. For this student forum—the New Hampshire Young People's Organization, as it is called—is of, by and for the students.

But Sunday is not the only day, and a religious gathering is not the only occasion when students turn toward the church. The freshman's first formal introduction to college social life is at the regular Freshman Frolic held annually on the first Friday night of the college year. Here he learns the college songs and cheers; here he receives a word of welcome or counsel from the president of the college or the pastor; here he has a bite of ice-cream, if the sophomores with Gen. John Sullivan daring haven't carried it off. This past spring the social committee of the church tried an experiment. Every member of the senior class was invited to a party at the vestry. Would they come? What attraction could a church social have for a sophisticated group of one-step artists? The strawberry shortcake may have been the attraction. The vestry was crowded. When it was all over one of the most popular senior girls was heard to remark, "I haven't had so much fun since I came to college."

The college paper very generously prints community news and runs a free advertisement of the church services. In appreciation of this the Ladies' Aid gave



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BATTALION

a dinner in honor of the staff at the vestry. The words of the editor are very suggestive. In responding to his toast he said among other things, "Running a college paper is no fun. Everybody knocks us. But the church understands us and our aims."

Several fraternity houses are located near the church, and the boys are on call day and night. If the ladies at some vestry meeting want the piano moved, a call brings an athlete running. Just this last spring the town put a boulder and bronze memorial tablet on the church lawn. The appropriation was small and the committee called for volunteer labor. Most of the work in placing that six-ton boulder in position was done by a score of husky youths from a neighboring fraternity house. Even if a student doesn't attend church every Sunday he knows that it is his church.

Denominational lines are not sharply drawn. Hebrews and Greek Catholics mingle with Methodists and Baptists at the Sunday evening student forum. A dozen denominations are represented in the student associate membership of the church.

The Church and the Faculty: Members of the college faculty, together with their wives and children, find a religious home in the church. Coming as they do from all parts of the country the church serves a very useful purpose as a social solvent. The women mingle readily and easily in the several organizations of the church. As members of the Missionary Society they become as much at home at an old Colonial farm house several miles in the country as they do in a physics recitation room for a stereopticon lecture. The church clerk, the treasurer, musical director, two deacons, and clerk of the society are drawn from the faculty. One of the deacons brought a letter from a Lutheran church; the treasurer was once a good Methodist; the clerk, a Disciple.

The Church and the Village: And the old residents—is it still their church? Let this illustration serve as an answer. The church building was painted last spring. After the workmen had gone it was observed that they had neglected the large bulletin board on the church lawn. Early one morning the pastor noticed a man balancing himself on a rickety chair freshening up the bulletin board. He was a real “old timer,” the village postmaster and town wit, friend of everybody in the community. “I see they didn’t paint our sign board,” he remarked to the pastor, “so I thought I’d just do it myself.” Is it still the town church?

Fusing the Various Groups: The needs of the several groups in the town are not only met by the church, but the church brings her children together in auxiliary societies. An enterprising Men’s Club, meeting monthly at a “two-bit bean supper” in the Commons, brings faculty and townsmen together around a common pot of beans. Recently the members of the faculty entertained the men of the town at dinner. The after-dinner speech was a frank talk by the college president in which he dwelt on the needs and problems of the institution, for

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said he, "I know the men of Durham consider the college their chief industry." For an hour after he had finished, the dining hall rocked with laughter at direct hits on well-known folks in the rollicking minstrel show "put on" by the hosts, and a spirited clog dance by a dignified English professor brought down the house.

On New Year's day the entire community (excluding students, who are absent), comes up to the meeting-house dining room for the annual community dinner. When the turkey bones have been well picked there is a good sing, after which everybody who isn't washing dishes troops into the auditorium to conduct the annual business meeting of the church. The entire town, church members and non-church members, sits in judgment on the work of the past year, makes up the deficit if there is one, and plans the work of the future. The way the whole community, in solemn conclave assembled, considers the work of the church is worth a trip across the continent to see. Money is not raised by an every-member canvass but by a community canvass, townsmen and faculty members "hunting in pairs."

The slogan during the war was Every Liberty Bond Buyer a Church Pledger!



MAY QUEEN AND HER ATTENDANTS

The Church Building A Civic Center: The church building is considered as community property. It is used daily for the following meetings: Missionary Society, Ladies' Aid, Woman's Club, rug-making demonstration, exhibit by college extension department agent, numerous clubs for boys and girls, special village school meeting, Red Cross, Civics Committee to plan new sidewalks, etc. Every Christmas eve the citizens assemble around the community Christmas tree planted on the church lawn by the professor of forestry, to pledge anew their loyalty to the Christ of the Community.

And the Fruits: Out of this sense of a common unity in the church sprang the pageant of a year ago, witnessed by four thousand people on the rolling banks of the Oyster River, near the site of the original meeting-house. Two hundred students, townspeople and members of the faculty reproduced the early history of the town, including the founding of the church, the Indian massacre, and the hiding of the gunpowder under the meeting-house. Weather and tide were favorable and faith in the power of co-operative effort was vindicated. Farmers will not leave their plowing, professors their laboratories and students the ball field and soda fountain unless they are inwardly moved so to do. A community nurse has been made possible by this spirit of united effort who not only conducts clinics for village mothers but cares for the patients at the student infirmary. Last fall several denominations, catching the Durham spirit, voted large sums of money through their educational boards, not to establish mission churches in this promising field, but in conjunction with the Y. M. C. A. to put a full-time secretary and interdenominational pastor on the campus. And so it goes. The college has come to take a pride in the old town; the town believes it is better to make men and women than ships.

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In these days when Henry E. Jackson in his book "The Community Church" is telling us that the term "church" is too "limited to represent our growing democratic ideals" and that he "has gone from the church to the schoolhouse in order to enter the Christian ministry"; when John Haynes Holmes is sacrificing Christianity to gain the community, it is with relief and assurance that we turn to a community motivated and energized by the Gospel of the Kingdom as proclaimed and practiced by a church of Jesus Christ our Lord.



FRESHMAN AND SOPHOMORE ROPE PULL IN OYSTER RIVER

THE CONGREGATIONAL HOME MISSIONARY SOCIETY
287 FOURTH AVENUE
NEW YORK CITY