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The Larger Family

By J. S. Woodsworth
Secretary of the Canadian Welfare League

II.—The Local Church and the Community

The fundamental question which faces us is this, "Does the church exist for the community or the community for the church?" A young minister is sent out to take charge of a particular church. He finds a more or less well-established organization with a definite membership and with a fairly well recognized "constituency." His success is measured by the extent to which he "builds up" his

church, that is, gathers in new members and strengthens his organization. What wonder is it that to him the community is often simply a field of activity in which indeed he must bestir himself unless other rival organizations should take the lead. When several organizations are actuated by this spirit what wonder that the little community is torn into factions and that its real interests are neglected? We are blaming no one. We have inherited a difficult situation which has been complicated by the heterogeneous character of the population that constitutes most of Western communities. We blame no one; but let us frankly face the situation and the very difficulties may lead us out into broader ways, the very existence of which we had not dreamed of.

Few even of the most devoted church people would deny that there are good people in the other churches. Indeed not infrequently they would gladly receive them into their own organization. Then what are we working for? Merely for an organization or for the establishment of God's kingdom?

For the Community

Surely the local church exists for the good of the community. Suppose all the churches in your district really got hold of that idea, or, as we sometimes put it more strongly, were seized of that idea, what would happen?

The recognition that we were all working for one end would mean the prevalence of a kindly sympathetic brotherly spirit. No, that does not always exist. I know one little town where the Presbyterian church is in full view of the living-room window of the Methodist parsonage. Woe to the unlucky Methodist adherent who enters the Presbyterian church, and as for the stranger, if he does not attend the Methodist church there is at least the satisfaction that the Presbyterians "haven't got him."

This in the name of Christianity! Little wonder that under such circumstances some of the more thoughtful stand aloof. Of course it will be protested that this is an extreme case, that after all the churches are the salt of the earth. We are quite willing to admit a great deal. But not infrequently the good is the enemy of the best. If there is in a single community room for any improvement, by all means let us have the improvement. Remember, one of our mottoes was "Faces to the Future." After all only those whom the shoe fits need to put it on!

Co-operation or Competition?

Still further, then, the recognition that we are all working for one end would mean the substitution of co-operation for competition. What a revolution that would involve!

It might mean one church building instead of three or four. It might mean a union literary society. It might mean a division of labor so that the whole field would be more adequately served. It might mean a still greater specialization in which each church could attain to a truer and fuller expression of its own distinctive life. It need not mean union; it must not mean uniformity; it would mean unity and to that extent true Christianity.

But who can tell what it would mean? People cannot long work together before wonderful possibilities open up.

We are told that the rural communities

are lacking in social opportunities. With all sections working together rural social life could become wonderfully enriched. The local resources are abundant if only they could be united.

Or again, attention is often called to the lack of educational advantages in the little rural neighborhoods. Undoubtedly the country has frequently been drained to feed the city, and yet here again resources exist if they could only be made available. Among the ministers resident in a single little "town" we often find several college graduates. Many a college has been started with a smaller staff. Why not in every town a little academy—a miniature peoples' university? Plant and equipment already exist in the church building and school house which could be utilized for this purpose. On occasions special lecturers could be secured. These would be glad to go if assured in this way of a representative audience.

But to Minister

"But what about the minister?" cries someone in dismay. Perhaps some of the denominations would drop out of existence. Frankly we hope they would! But the church must learn, as the individual must learn, the Master's great lesson, that it exists not to be ministered unto but to minister, that it must be willing even to lose its life; and if it loses its narrower denominational, institutional life will it not manifest itself in the broader spiritual life which will permeate the community. And is not this Christianity?

"Ah," still comes the perplexed protest, "but co-operation is not the gospel." Co-operation is assuredly a gospel—a piece of good news. It is surely an important part of the good news proclaimed by Jesus. Co-operation is a pre-requisite to the coming of God's kingdom on earth and one of the surest indications of the establishment of that kingdom. The co-operation of which we speak, the manifestation of the filial and the fraternal spirit in the larger family is surely simply the teaching of Jesus as to how we may inherit the life of the ages, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . and thy neighbor as thyself."

We advocates of co-operative effort are not on our trial. Rather, they who defend any condition that makes for division must justify themselves before the bar of common-sense and in the light of a religion which stands for love and brotherhood.

In this number we have been trying to diagnose the disease and to point out its seriousness. There is no need that we should give further illustrations of the weaknesses in our social life, the various correspondents have supplied abundant information. What we want now is something constructive. Let us know what is being done in your community that you think might with advantage be copied elsewhere, or if there is some particular problem, let us know and perhaps we may find someone who can help solve it.

BUSTER AND THE FARMER

Buster Brown of the comic supplement says:—

"I don't bear any grudge against that farmer. I had my fun and I paid the price. I wouldn't blame a farmer for anything; he has an uphill job at best, with nothing at all to do. All the farmer has to do is to plow the ground and harrow it and sow the seed and then if a drought doesn't come along and burn it all up a flood waits until it looks pretty good then drowns it. Then if it is a good year why the prices are so low it doesn't pay to haul it to town. If it's alright, all he has to do is reap it and thresh it or husk it and store it and haul it and sell it and go back home and have fun with the cows and pigs and lead a jolly life of excitement. Oh! it's great."

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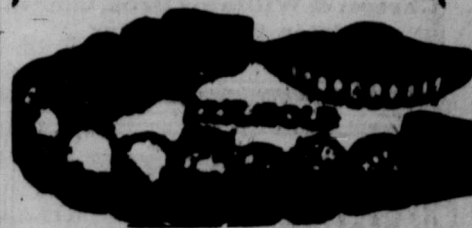
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