

The Western Churchman

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE INTERESTS OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN MANITOBA AND THE WEST

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THE OFFICE OF LAY READER.

In an ecclesiastical province like that of Rupert's Land, extending over a vast area, and having hundreds of settlements which as yet are but very sparsely populated, it follows, as a natural consequence, that if the Church is to take care of her scattered members she must make use of lay help to a very considerable extent. Even were church funds for mission work doubled, it would be quite impossible to maintain in every settlement a duly ordained clergyman.

The church, through her rulers, recognises this fact, and is only too glad to use the services of devoted laymen; and, it is well that it should be so. At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that the use of lay readers in the care of missions where there is no resident clergyman is fraught with certain difficulties that seem at times to spoil much really good work. Two of these have lately been brought before us, and concerning them we have a few suggestions to make.

1. It is said, in many quarters, that the right kind of men are not as a rule willing to undertake the work. 2. It is also asserted, and we believe with some truth, that many church people, even in very remote settlements, are so dissatisfied with services conducted by lay readers that they would, rather than attend such, transfer their allegiance, at all events temporarily, to one or other of the religious bodies that may

happen to have a station in the district. Can nothing be done to overcome these difficulties?

In regard to the first, we venture with all respect to say, that the office of lay reader does not receive that standing which it merits, in the estimation of our ecclesiastical authorities. Instead of being regarded as a distinct and definite office, it is treated as a necessary evil—a mere expedient. It seems often to be forgotten that from very early days the Catholic church has had the active assistance of the laity in the carrying on of distinctly mission work. The various classes, which afterwards developed into the minor orders of the Mediæval Church, were originally laymen set apart to perform certain kinds of church work, without their having been admitted even to the diaconate. Now, the lay readers ought to receive the same recognition as was given in bygone days to the minor orders. They should be carefully chosen after they have satisfied the clergyman of the parish that they possess a peculiar aptitude for the work. It must be remembered that while earnestness and real goodness are necessary qualifications, these are not all. A reader ought to have a general education which is at least not inferior to that of the majority of the church people in the district, otherwise his work must be to some extent a failure. He ought to possess such a fund of general information that he will quite naturally become the adviser of the people among whom he works, not only in respect of spiritual things, but also as regards social life and conduct. He should possess a fairly ready utterance, and be able to read the public prayers of the church in a manner that will tend to intelligent and reverent worship. He should be one whom both old and young will regard with respect and esteem; and then, when such a man has been found, and duly tested, he should be admitted to his office, in a public and formal manner, by the Bishop. The formal admission of lay readers, at a special service duly arranged for the purpose, has been found most valuable in many dioceses, both in the old country and in the colonies.

With regard to the second difficulty, it may quite be expected that the removal of the first will affect it as well. It will be found that greater care in the selection of lay readers, and greater prominence given to their office in the manner indicated, will have a wonderful effect on the church people among whom