

The Larger Family

By J. S. Woodsworth
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III.—The People's Forum

In Winnipeg the forum movement is extending rapidly and seems to be filling a need that is becoming more clearly recognized. It would appear that in the "forum" we have discovered an institution that would be suited to our Western communities where it could perform a most important function.

The first people's forum in Canada was organized in North Winnipeg six years ago in an attempt to draw together into helpful intercourse the mixed foreign population of that district. This mother-organization is now a regularly incorporated body with a record of years of successful work and an experience that has demonstrated something of the possibilities of such an institution. Half a dozen other forums have since been organized and it has been shown that the forum is adapted to purely English speaking urban districts. It remains to be seen how far it will succeed in the little towns and rural districts. Our impression is that once tried out and possibly modified it will be found to be "just what we were looking for" and that forums will spring up all over the prairie.

The forum is simply a meeting for free discussion and is open to everyone in the district irrespective of nationality, religion, politics, social standing or sex, men and women, Liberals and Conservatives and Socialists, Protestants of all denominations, Roman Catholics and Jews, Canadians and foreigners all simply as members of the community have an equal right to be present and to participate in the discussions and in the management of the forum.

The forum breaks down the artificial barriers that so seriously divide our Western communities. It takes people out of their own little circle. It broadens their interests and makes them tolerant and sympathetic towards those who hold views different from their own. It helps to create a common interest, to develop a community spirit and thus to prepare the way for a more disinterested and efficient citizenship.

Sunday Meetings

In Winnipeg the meetings are held on Sunday afternoons. This appears to be the most suitable time. It does not interfere with the regular church services, it provides an interesting and profitable way of spending the day devoted to rest and higher interests, it attracts many who do not attend frequently the ordinary church services. Many churches are now attempting to organize brotherhoods. In many districts if each denomination did this there would be half a dozen poorly attended meetings. If the forum idea was adopted there would be one well attended meeting uniting on Sunday those whose interests are during the week practically the same.

In Winnipeg, again, the meetings are held in one of the splendid public school buildings. The school belongs to the community. Every citizen has an equal right to the use of the building. The use of a church or lodge room may prejudice some against the meeting. In the school everyone feels at home and under obligations to no one. More and more our public schools will be used for all kinds of community activities.

A Wide Program

The subjects discussed cover a wide range. Last year's program at the People's Forum in North Winnipeg included the following:—
Mrs. Nellie L. McClung—"Women and War."
City Solicitor Hunt—"The Rate-payer Pays."
Professor Stoughton—"The Gothic Cathedral."
F. J. Dixon—"The Land Speculator."
Roderick McKenzie and others—"The Rural Life Problem."
Herman Saltzmann—"The Social Democratic Movement."

Health Inspector Hague—"The Housing Problem."

Dr. Bland—"God's Family of the Nations."

Miss Francis Beynon and others—"The Woman Movement."

Rev. Father Blain—"The Planetary System."

Geo. F. Chipman—"Railway Nationalization."

T. A. Crerar—"The Canadian Banking System." The underlying idea is that "views extensively held and opinions widely entertained should be stated publicly in the interest of all."

Some may object that these are not religious topics. In our earlier articles we tried to show that the distinction between sacred and secular was artificial and must be broken down. We have left religion out of our politics and economics, and what a mess we have made of them! Sunday is none too holy a day to devote to promoting a higher type of citizenship and securing greater justice for those who now do not have a chance to live out

their highest and best lives. Even the scientific lectures which the ordinary workman would not have the opportunity of hearing may lead men to broader views and higher aspirations. The Psalmist himself is responsible for the statement that "the heavens declare the glory of God." Why, then, bar astronomy on Sunday?

Music

In addition to the lecture there are often one or two musical items. There are few who do not enjoy good music. The ordinary procedure is to have the lecture followed first by questions and then by discussion on the subject of the lecture. A time limit is set so that while everyone has a chance, no one will monopolize the time. The chairman insists that there shall be no irrelevant discussion.

No resolutions are permitted. Such a proceeding would be contrary to the spirit of the forum. The forum does not stand for any particular policy or reform. It is simply an open platform. Truth is strong enough to take care of itself!

Membership in the forum is open to any one interested who pays the small fee which has been found necessary for printing programs and other incidental expenses such, for example, as providing a lantern for the illustrated lectures.

The management of the forum is in the hands of a board elected by the members and which is really representative of all sections of the community. It has been found necessary in the city to have a musical committee, an ushers' committee and a publicity committee.

A Basis of Citizenship

It is important that great care should be given to the selection of the board of management. Sometimes it is suggested that there should be a federation of the churches and that one or more members should be appointed from each church. Such an organization may be very good, but it is not in harmony with the forum idea. It is still a church affair and in practice it will be found impossible to unite, say, Protestants and Catholics on a church basis. These same Protestants and Catholics will unite on the basis of a common citizenship. So while there should probably be a member of each denomination on the board, let him come not as a representative from his church, but as a "representative man" in the community. Similarly while the board would include members of the various political parties, these men—or women, we should now say—would come simply as citizens, not as representatives of their party. This is important, more important than might appear. It is vital to the forum idea. In the forum, denomination and party are, as it were, for the moment set aside. In attempting to find points of



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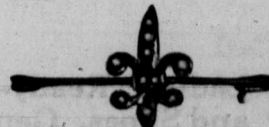
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