

What can be done to avert this tragic state of affairs? My plea is for much closer *liaison* than now exists between the theological colleges and the directors of post-ordination training. If this could be achieved, by means of conferences and so on, I think the load of teaching at the theological colleges might be lightened, and the post-ordination training considerably brightened, to the lasting benefit of both!

This article is, necessarily, a very small thing on a very large subject. On many important aspects it has not even touched. But I believe that, if its main tenets were worked out and followed up, less men than now would have to say, in the later decades of their ministry, in wholly minor tones, "*non talis sum quam eram*". More would be able to say, even as physical strength declined: "I keep pressing on toward the mark for the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus".

The Work of a Parish

BY JOHN GOSS

"**T**HERE are three things which have not changed with time; the hunger of the human soul for God; the satisfaction of that hunger in the Gospel; and the Church's trusteeship as the steward of God's Word and Sacraments." So wrote R. C. Joynt in 1934, and his words are as true today. To his three changeless factors might well be added a fourth—the character required in those to whom is committed the leadership in ministering the Gospel of Redemption. "Christian Stewardship" is the phrase of the hour—too often hinged to money-getting—and the adjective should be underlined, for without that quality in its fullest reality no man can be found faithful, and no effort, however spectacular can prove truly fruitful. The work of a parish is a particular stewardship—that of precious souls committed to the care of one chosen and called to this great task, and the character demanded of him, if he is to be found faithful, is that of a Man of God. Rightly does the Ordinal declare the Christian Ministry to be "an office both of so great excellency and so great difficulty". The qualities are the same in every age, and the excellency will be maintained and the difficulties surmounted only as it can be said of the minister as it was of Elisha of old, "I perceive that this is an holy Man of God". Where that can be said we may be sure the excellency will always transform the difficulty, and helps will not be lacking to minister the Bread of Life to fainting souls, even where the cure of fifteen or twenty thousand of them has been committed to one ordained minister.

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Remembering that the basic needs and problems are the same, though patterns vary and proportions change, let us consider first

the work of a rural charge. Here, after all, is where the parochial ministry began, and, despite swelling populations and increasing urban densities, sixty-five per cent of the parishes of England still have populations under five hundred; so here is where the majority of our clergy will spend their working lives. The study of the country parson on his benefice has often been undertaken for pleasure and given as a scene typical of English country life. It has seldom been essayed to derive from it those fundamental principles which govern every sincere and effective ministry. Despite the changes of recent years, most country parsons still have a task well within their spiritual and physical capacity. They can still be shepherds with a knowledge of and concern for each single sheep, and the time to pray about the personal needs of each of them. Their pastoral labours are not impeded by the mass of organization and office work which clogs the efforts of their urban brethren. While the tempo of country life has quickened in this age of speed, there is still time to visit regularly and methodically, to lean on a gate and talk, to wander through the fields and meet the men at their work, to take a leading part in every aspect of village life and really enter into the interests of their people.

Thank God that the true pastor of the George Herbert type is still to be met with in the country, and the joy and satisfaction of the personal ministry is seen shining from his face and reflected in the lives of his people. In such places there is no lament about empty pews and no lack of ready help for every parochial need. Village life wilted badly when the complex rush and bustle of modern ways invaded it, and it is noteworthy that it regained its poise and peace most quickly where the church was alive and the parson a pastor. More than one local authority has testified to the unifying power of the parish church in holding community life to a high standard and integrating its various interests for the common good. At the same time, it must be admitted that, on the whole, the rural ministry is sadly languishing today. This is partly due to a definite change in the type of man coming to serve the country churches. Too often he has a background which is entirely urban—a great handicap not easily surmounted even by the most zealous minister. Country life is country life, despite all the changes, and it is no use pretending that anyone can fit into it easily and without experience, let alone lead it in matters spiritual. The new vicar who is observed by his parishioners planting potatoes as if they were shallots or who refers to kale as cabbage, or barley as wheat, is unlikely to make much mark with his pulpit utterances, or much progress in gaining the sympathy of his flock. A great need, and one that could be met without much difficulty, is for a "Preliminary Training School for Country Parsons" in every rural diocese, where these raw recruits from the towns could be somewhat acclimatized and so saved at all events a few years of futility and frustration.

Pastoral reorganization and minimum stipends are other factors that militate against a settled and efficient rural ministry. No man can look after three or four parishes, however small the population, with satisfaction to himself and his people, and the more remote the charge the more difficult it is to fill when there is a wide choice at the

same stipend. Essential as was the Pastoral Reorganization Measure in view of the acute shortage of clergy, it has too easily become an accepted part of the order of things, and a frank appraisal of its results must cause grave concern for the future of village church life. It is no uncommon experience in many rural areas to find the normal congregation dwindled down to two or three, and in some places to have altogether disappeared. How easy it is then to regard a church as "redundant" and practically to close down what should be a centre of vitality in the district. The proximity of other churches is no excuse, as anyone who knows the local pride and stubborn conservatism of the countryman will agree. On paper in the diocesan office these unions seem reasonable and workable, and are, of course, a great help to the Stipends Fund. From the practical, pastoral point of view they can prove disastrous, and the selling of "surplus" parsonages strikes a chill into the hearts of those who have watched this sad process of putting up the shutters on church life before and know the inevitable result.

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If we believe that we are the Church of the Living God, and hold our commission from Him, then we must keep the ideal of a parson to every parish, and pray and plan for its return in fact in years to come. For the time being, it is still possible in a limited form by keeping large groupings to a minimum, and training "locums" to fill the gaps. The merits of what is called the "Part-Time Priesthood" are being urged again, but there is no reason why the "persona" in the smaller places need be in Orders at all. Bearing in mind the fact that it is only through the noble work of our Lay Readers that many churches keep open today, let an army of godly laymen be trained and commissioned and used to keep alight the lamp of faith in every place, conducting services, preaching the Word, ministering to the sick as they visit the people, leading organizations and generally supervising the parish under the direction of the Rural Dean. Some of them might, eventually, be ordained and remain in their charge; others would wish to continue to work as laymen as long as they were able to be of service. Such a plan would, at all events, refute the common criticism that the Church is forsaking the countryside, and would maintain the work and witness until such time as the ordination graph rises again to its proper level.

The country clergyman, with a love of souls, settled in his benefice, not seeking preferment, knowing, loving, and teaching his people, is an influence for good, and a strength to the Church far beyond the confines of his parish. The successful extension of church work in the great urban areas after the Industrial Revolution was largely staffed by godly men and women who had moved in from the country, and it is still so today. A clergyman lately instituted to a parish of 20,000 in the Black Country writes: "I got a congregation of ten the first Sunday, but the only person to come to the Prayer Meeting is a gift from God, a young apprentice whose home is on the Welsh Border, and who is full of zeal and enthusiasm to help me evangelize this enormous population." If the town parson has little time for

the intense personal work needed to build up new converts into strong working Christians, let us be thankful that this can still be done in the country, and let those who are privileged to be doing it regard such endeavour as their contribution towards the conversion of England.

Contrary to much that is spoken and written, given the proper staffing of parishes, the future of the Church in the country is full of hope. The immense changes in working and social conditions in the past fifty years must be, in the long run, favourable to a revival of religion. The better payment of the farm worker, his improved housing, modern education, and speedier communications, have done much to remove the sullen, apathetic attitude which was once so common. The mechanization of agriculture has brought farming into the top group of profitable occupations, and the modern farmer and his family have a strong interest in the improvement of local conditions and the strengthening of community life. The passing of the Squire and the Big House has left the parson with a wonderful opportunity of leadership, and a man who gives a strong spiritual example, provides simple, Prayer Book services at sensible hours, and enters into all that is good in every part of village life, will never lack encouragement and co-operation, nor a congregation.

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To turn from the country to the town is to be confronted with problems vastly different, and yet the same fundamental pastoral principles must apply if the minister is to "take heed to all the flock". If "taking heed" involves following the apostolic example of ministering "both publicly and from house to house"—as it surely does—the town parson faced with even a moderate population of ten to fifteen thousand might well be tempted to despair. To be charged with the care of such a large number, and to face it singlehanded, is no uncommon experience when curates are so few and far between. Yet it is of the first importance to maintain the principle, if only as an ideal. It will be a sad day indeed when the national Church repudiates her responsibility for every soul in the land, and the rapid growth of urban areas is surely a reason for the extension rather than the abandonment of the parochial system. Leighton used to commiserate with the London clergy when the extent of their cures prevented the giving of individual attention to their flock. In his retirement he wrote: "Were I again to be a Parish Minister, I must follow sinners to their homes, even to their alehouses." That is the spirit of the true pastor, and is all-important even though he can follow but one sinner at a time.

"It is required of stewards that a man be found faithful", and a man's faithfulness in parish work can be limited only by those physical and material conditions which are beyond his control. For the town incumbent there is the same sense of satisfaction in duty faithfully performed in the regular visitation of a tenth of his population as there is to his country brother who can knock every month on every door in his parish. What is needed in the towns is an overall strategy, agreed by bishops, clergy, and laity, as to the method of attack on these dense populations, and a pooling of resources to put it into

effect. This is not to advocate the wholesale combining of parishes and the "clerical flying-squad" methods which have been tried and found sadly wanting in several places. It is rather to provide the encouragement and sympathy and prayer-backing which a hard-pressed town parson must have, together with the practical assistance of such men and monies as are available.

There is a strong temptation to suppose that little can be done until there is a great increase in the number of clergy. The town parson is expected to be content with baptizing, marrying, and burying, signing forms, and visiting as many of the sick as possible. Church halls to seat two or three hundred are run up on the vast housing estates, a young man of little or no experience installed, and left to scratch at the surface of a problem which should be the concern of the whole Church. Meanwhile a whole generation is born and dies without coming under the sound of the Gospel, and the great opportunities before the national Church are lost forever. We have much to learn from the Early Church, which faced a similar problem of obtaining entry into a pagan society, and met it by the full use of all her believers. To read the lists of "fellow-helpers" in the Epistles and the Acts, is to realize the answer to the insistent question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" It is to use and send those who have accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour, and are therefore committed to this very task. There are industrial and residential parishes today where the Church is on the march because the leader is content to lead, and has inspired his followers to get to grips with the foe, and to find lodgement in his territory from which further advances can be made as reinforcements arrive.

Just as Evangelical churchmen years ago preached "Christian Stewardship" and set a high example of planned giving, not merely to maintain the home Church, but to send missionaries to the far corners of the world, so today they may claim to have led the way in the training of lay leaders. It is worth considering, in passing, the effect on the life of the Church if the initiative and zeal which give rise to such important developments were removed by the present unfortunate tendency to discourage and repress those who hold Evangelical opinions. It is also worth remarking that the revival of the Church might proceed if such men were given posts of authority and responsibility from which to inspire it. There is, of course, nothing new in the scheme for training believers to lead. It simply follows the scriptural pattern restored in this country at the Reformation, to become the source of manpower for the Evangelical Revival, and the reason, not only for the progress, but for the establishment and maintenance of Methodism.

About a hundred years ago, Henry Venn, finding himself in what was then the poverty-stricken, vice-ridden, straggling village of Drypool, and unable himself to deal with the large numbers who never came near the church, trained and led a band of fifty parish workers and established the pastoral methods of work for which the Hull area has ever since been famous. It is noteworthy too, that the Church Pastoral-Aid Society, founded in 1836, was to work for its objective of the salvation of souls by "granting aid towards maintaining faithful

and devoted *men or women* to assist the Incumbents of parishes in their pastoral charge", and has always used a good proportion of its income for lay agents. Where these methods are adopted and extended, converted men and women in each parish being encouraged to volunteer their help and to be commissioned for the work after due training, there will not only be no problem of manpower, but a remarkable spirit of devotion and determination will spring up in the parish as the congregation gradually becomes a working fellowship, in very fact the Body of Christ, with every part of the work conceived and nurtured in prayer and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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The parish minister should be careful to maintain his right to shepherd every soul within his cure. There is an increasing tendency today for parishes to be invaded by diocesan officials of one sort or another, who, in virtue of special training, are held to be more competent than the incumbent to deal with some section of his population. Large works and factories must have "Industrial Chaplains", schools and colleges "Advisers in Religious Education", and so with various other institutions and social divisions, until the parson finds a great part of his charge usurped and the loyalties of his people divided. By all means let him make full use of the specialists, but they must be under his direction and control, and he must be able to plan the strategy of his parish work as a whole and seek to bring every person in his cure under the sound of the Gospel. In many parishes, moreover, he will be able to find his own specialists from among his congregation, and to make specific parts of the work their special concern. A factory-gate meeting is twice as effective when addressed by a retired shop steward, and a school or college Christian Union will really flourish when led by one of its own members. The number of openings for evangelistic enterprise to be found in the average town parish is quite amazing, and the building up of the team from among the congregation begins from the moment the need and intention is made a matter of prayer. Of all the aspects of parochial life today there is none more encouraging than the increasing emphasis on the Parish Prayer Meeting as the one essential fixture of the week. Many clergy are also making a point of organizing an annual House Party, at which the work of prayer can be increased and the fellowship and training of the team developed.

Again, be it said, there is nothing new in all this. These methods, or variants of them, have been tried and proved successful in many parishes through the years. The publicity given to such endeavours nowadays simply arises from the sad fact that live parishes are so often bright spots against a sombre background of empty churches, weary, disillusioned clergy, and apathetic people. Why have not the bright spots spread their influence and penetrated the darkness round about them? Many of the live parishes are Evangelical, and have with the virtues, inherited the weaknesses of their tradition. The open opposition to Gospel preaching in the last century kept the Evangelicals within their own territory, and, not unnaturally, encouraged in some of them a spirit of resentment, suspicion, and

self-satisfaction, to the great detriment of the Church and of the progress of the Kingdom. If the great contribution these parishes could have made had been welcomed and encouraged by the Church and used to the full, we should surely have seen revival in England long since. It may be said that the hostility persists today, latent if not open, and that Evangelicals are not wanted in the wider life of the Church. Those who say so have often done nothing to test their theory. In recent years it has usually been the case that where an Evangelical parish has entered fully into diocesan life and made its voice heard in its affairs, there has been a welcome spirit of fellowship and interest and a readiness to use its contribution to the wider sphere of work. This is the way to expand our work and increase our activities, and it can be done without any compromise of principle. A generation is growing up which knows nothing of the great traditions of Bible teaching, evangelism, and pastoral work which Evangelicals believe to be the true genius of the Church of England. Let us take every opportunity of enlightening them, and, as we do so, strengthen these principles among ourselves to stand the strain, and emerge unbroken from the conflicts and pressures which may lie ahead.

Exacting and disappointing as it may be sometimes, there is still nothing quite so thrilling and rewarding as the endeavour to fulfil the Lord's commission in the setting of a parish. For the minister the task must often seem quite beyond his powers even when helped by a loyal band of fellow-workers. He can accomplish it only in the strength of the promise given by the Lord to the Apostles, and as he, like them, gives himself up in complete dedication to do the Master's will. This singleness of purpose is born only of a singleness of mind and a rock-like character such as that shown by John the Baptist, who "did no miracle" indeed, but who yet compelled attention and respect and the declaration: "All things that John spake of this man were true!" It is the faith that springs from deep certainty as to the Person and Work of Jesus, expecting Him to "restore the Kingdom", that merits the great promise: "Ye shall receive power." In that power and with the commission that accompanies it, we may calmly face the problems of parish work and go out with the anointing of the Spirit "to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord . . .".