

THE CHURCH AND
ADULT EDUCATION

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by Bernard E. Meland

IN PREPARATION

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Foreword

DURING the World War pilot photographers rode through the air, crossed boundaries, clicked their cameras, and then dashed back to headquarters to reveal what they had hastily observed. My task in this study has been somewhat akin to that of the pilot photographer. I have tried to get glimpses, here and there throughout the country, of adult education activities now going on in the churches and synagogues. My observations have taken me into the church centers of New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Denver; the Temple grounds of Salt Lake City; and churches along the far West Coast from San Francisco to San Diego. Through other eyes I have peered into meetings of Boston synagogues and New England churches; felt the stir and the pall of long-time projects among the miners and steel workers in eastern Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia; trailed traveling educational projects into the Old South, and into the far northwestern country of Montana, Oregon, and Washington.

What I have gathered and reported in these pages is but a sampling of significant work being done. What I have omitted or overlooked would doubtless fill many more pages. Enough has been presented here, perhaps, to suggest the scope and character of adult education which churches and synagogues are undertaking.

For much of my information, even the gathering of it, I have had to depend upon many other people. Clergymen, rabbis, and

religious educators throughout the land have been generous in providing me with material. To mention them individually would obviously be impossible, but I acknowledge my indebtedness to them. I am particularly indebted to Harry C. Munro, of the International Council of Religious Education; to Sister Julie, of Rosary College, River Forest, Illinois; and to Samuel M. Blumenfield, of the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago, who, early in my explorations, gave me valuable suggestions. Prior to my study of the field, Jess Ogden made careful inquiry into adult education activities in the churches and synagogues, visiting many centers throughout the country and gathering material as he went. All his material has been put at my disposal and I have drawn heavily upon it. In describing projects among workers, I have used his report of interviews with leaders and church workers in mining areas. My indebtedness to his efforts are therefore evident. Dorothy Rowden, of the American Association for Adult Education, spent several days observing activities of churches and synagogues in New York and Boston, and the results of her investigations have been incorporated in this study. Notes on interviews with Jewish leaders in eastern states were provided by Eve Chappell. Wilbur Hallenbeck's "A Study of Adult Education in Thirty New York Churches," a manuscript prepared for the Department of Adult Education of Teachers College, Columbia University, has proved particularly suggestive, and I have quoted from it not infrequently.

I wish to take occasion, also, to express appreciation to Morse A. Cartwright and Mary L. Ely for their patient and encouraging cooperation during dark days of preparation; and to Everett Dean Martin for his sympathetic counsel and suggestions.

BERNARD EUGENE MELAND

PART I

OF MOODS AND TRENDS

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The Church and the Modern Tempo

WERE a man of ancient or medieval times to saunter through the modern city church or synagogue, as I have had occasion to do often in recent months, he would be bewildered beyond understanding. Doors! Many of them, opening into rooms filled with busy people—busy with listening, learning, or just “doing things.” On a tour one Tuesday evening through a prominent city church on the West Coast, undoubtedly one of the most enterprising parish centers along the Pacific, I counted not less than fifteen doors that led into group meetings of one kind or another.

“Here,” said the minister, opening a door with obvious pride, “are some of our people listening to a lecture on cooperatives.”

So they were—fifty or more men and women, ranging in age from college sophomores to graybeards beyond sixty, too engrossed in what they were hearing to notice our interruption.

“In this room,” the minister continued, pointing to an adjoining doorway, “some of our women are planning a bazaar. Across the way our musicians are practicing an oratorio. And in this room to the right,” he said, with rising enthusiasm, pointing to a door ajar, “a young married people’s dramatic club is selecting a play for its next performance. They’re an amazing lot. All

amateurs, of course, except Barnes, the director. He did a bit of professional acting in his time, but was injured during the War and had to give up the work for a while. When he was ready to return to the stage, business wasn't moving fast enough to take him up. He is in business here in the city; but on Tuesday nights you'll find him in this room, coaching lines, putting up sets, or going through some new play, just as he's doing now."

A striking figure he was, too. A dozen younger adults were gathered about him, listening attentively. Now and then one of them would break in with a question. The last one had elicited lusty laughter.

We were coming to the church auditorium. The hum of many voices and the sight of ushers at the door brought my question, "And are you having a meeting here too?"

"Oh yes!" was the minister's quick reply. "The People's Forum. The lecture tonight is on Current Philosophies. We'll come and listen after you have seen the recreation room."

When the door to the vast social room, two flights below the auditorium, had been flung open, we gazed upon a sea of swirling figures. A hundred, perhaps a hundred and fifty, boys and girls, most of them of high school age, were dancing to "swing" as one might find them doing at the Trocadero or the Wilshire Bowl.

What is this phenomenal round of Church Night activity? Has the church finally found its stride? Or has it lost its way, following with enthusiasm many paths, with no clear objective?

The opinion of the churchmen themselves is divided on these questions. "The church is part of the community, and, unless it

is leading the community in the things people are intent upon doing, its doors will close.” So say activist leaders who have found their solution for the modern church in more activities.

“No!” insist others. “The church is not a club. It is a place of worship! And if this is forgotten, the church is lost. It may as well close its doors.”

However churchmen may resolve this perplexing issue, the fact remains that the church of many rooms and meetings is the symbol of the modern parish. It matters little whether the creed is of Calvin or Arminius, whether the tradition is high church or low, or even whether the building be temple, synagogue, church, or parish meeting house. A comparison of the architectural structure of the modern church with that of traditional edifices gives evidence of the new change of emphasis. Rambling buildings or impressive structures resembling schoolhouses adjoin the sanctuary or church auditorium, eloquently declaring that, in the modern church, education and recreation have joined hands with worship.

In this quickened tempo of today's church are to be seen many significant developments. One is the rise of religious education, with its echoing of the principle of learning by doing. Another is the growth of the social club. In some cases, these clubs are initiated as relief or welfare organizations, but many of them continue on a different basis as their members find satisfaction in learning and working together. Still another development is the transformation of the traditional midweek prayer meeting into family night at the church, sublimating the evangelical concern into a more pronounced social interest.

Most recent among new developments is the interest in adult

education. Since the beginning of the organized adult education movement in 1926, the educating of adults increasingly has become an interest of paramount importance to the churches. Like others in the educational field, religious leaders were greatly impressed by the results of Thorndike's studies concerning the ability of adults to learn, published in his book, *Adult Learning*. They were intrigued, also, by news of the experiences of the Scandinavian countries, especially Denmark, where the folk-school movement had achieved notable results among adults. Reports from Great Britain, where the adult education movement had definitely taken hold, further served to stimulate their interest. With the nation-wide emphasis upon correlating and further developing adult activities, following the formation of the American Association for Adult Education in this country, a new impetus was felt among religious groups to take the church seriously as an educational force in the community.

Pioneers like William Rainey Harper had long anticipated this more general development in adult education through experimental efforts to communicate critical and historical scholarship to church people in the form of popular Bible study, summer schools, extension courses, and weekly institutes. The formation of The American Institute of Sacred Literature in 1889, under the stimulus of Dr. Harper, was the beginning of a significant educational enterprise for adults. It is estimated that "in a single decade Institute courses were pursued by 75,000 students, and in one year the number reached 10,000. Students were enrolled from every state in the Union, every division of the western hemisphere, every important European or Asiatic country, and even from Africa and Australia. Among these were representatives of every Protestant denomination, as well as

Roman Catholics and Jews. Six million pages of printed matter were supplied in the form of directions for study."¹

Before his death, President Harper arranged for the Institute to be taken over by the University of Chicago. Subsequent directors of its work were Ernest DeWitt Burton, Shailer Mathews, and Georgia L. Chamberlin. Under their competent leadership, this widely influential enterprise continued to operate vigorously for half a century.

The Chautauqua Institution at Chautauqua, New York, founded by Lewis Miller and John H. Vincent more than sixty-five years ago, continues to be an active enterprise in adult education. "Chautauqua Institution is attended by many thousands of people each year," writes Shailer Mathews in *New Faith For Old*, "and has been a great influence in the development of intellectual life in America. In it religion is given distinct recognition, but the Institution itself is not religious. Its interest is quite as great in music, education, recreation, and current affairs. Many outstanding figures in these various fields have had a share in developing its influence."

The Institute of the League for Social Service, another pioneer effort to educate the adults of the churches, organized in 1898, served to provide a clearinghouse for social information as well as to conduct university extension work for social education. "The Institute provided weekly study outlines for adult groups in Sunday schools, Young Men's Christian Associations, and other organizations, and successful classes were organized in many parts of the United States and Canada. . . . It has been estimated that over 40,000 people were reached by these courses.

¹ Philip H. Lotz and L. W. Crawford, *Studies in Religious Education*. Cokesbury, 1931.

. . . In addition to the study outlines, the Institute established a lecture service, providing addresses for churches, ecclesiastical bodies, and ministerial associations. Over five hundred such lectures were delivered during a period of ten weeks."²

Along with these pioneer efforts must be mentioned also the courses of study, night schools, and summer institutes developed by the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A., which have become extensively established as educational institutions in their own right. The Y.M.C.A. of the City of New York, for example, reports an attendance at formal educational classes of over 350,000 for the year 1938, with more than 183,000 attending informal activities of an educational type—lectures, forums, clubs and groups, educational films, current issues, educational tours, vocational study. Adult education is offered in remedial classes through its evening high school; in vocational courses through trade and technical schools, the New York Institute of Accountancy, and other special agencies; and in cultural courses including art, dramatics, music, languages, psychology, history, and political science. Similar educational opportunities are provided through the facilities of the Y.M.C.A.'s and Y.W.C.A.'s in cities throughout the country. In their educational operations the Christian Associations remain essentially institutes of adult education, catering to individuals beyond college age who are intent upon seeking educational advantages that were not available to them earlier in life.

Within recent years, the center of educational activity among the adults of the churches has been moving steadily toward the churches and the synagogues themselves. Extension courses and special institutes under other auspices continue, to be sure; yet

² *Ibid.*

the church and the synagogue seem to be becoming the focal centers for the new ventures. Even where the Christian Associations or similar organizations have taken the lead in organizing and directing adult education activities in a community, as I found to be the case in Denver, the church and the synagogue are the strategic centers through which educational programs are being projected. The modern church is becoming an educating church.

Something more than institutional expansion and the concern to keep pace with a popular movement, however, has brought about this development in the churches and synagogues. Throughout all religious bodies—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Mormon, not to mention minority groups—the pressure of the times is being felt. The pervading sense of confusion among all classes of people has led preachers and rabbis to address their congregations on such themes as “Clear Thinking in Confused Times.” The threat to cherished values of modern culture has impelled clergymen, along with enlightened leaders in other fields, to help modern folk appreciate, on the one hand, the achievements of civilization that are still available to them and to understand, on the other hand, the processes at work that are endangering these achievements. The growing sense of insecurity that pervades this country today has made necessary some attempt among church leaders to deal intelligently with so mundane a problem as security in a changing world. Indeed, the flood waters of the changing times have invaded the Gothic sanctuary fully as much as the skyscrapers of Manhattan, and the desire to cope with the rising tide is as evident in the pulpit and its adjoining rooms as in the conference rooms of Wall Street and the press rooms of the nation. It is not so much by choice,

then, as in response to insistent and imperative demands that the church and synagogue have acquired the modern tempo. In assuming an educational role in critical times, they have had to become peculiarly sensitive to implications in the onrush of current events. If today the church sometimes seems to forget that “sense of the eternal” and its traditional heritage, it but reflects the weakness of all modern institutions that strive to confront the issues of an urgent present. If this is lamentable, it is also understandable.

Educator Through the Ages

EDUCATING the adult through the churches is not a new departure. The Jewish rabbi will tell you that "the ideal of adult education has been the leitmotiv of Jewish life through the ages. Not merely the rabbis and the scholars were expected to engage in study, but all elements of the population—the merchant, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker—all would set apart time for study early in the morning before the business day began and late in the afternoon when business ended.

"The impetus received from the early synagogues and Talmudic schools helped maintain and preserve this cause of Jewish education even through the Dark Ages. Thus we find in the twelfth century the Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, urging the cause of adult education as a cardinal law of Judaism which every Jew must obey."

Every Israelite must engage in study, whether he is rich or poor, whether he is healthy or sick, whether he is very young or old and has no more strength; and even if he is a pauper who lives on charity or on alms, and even if he has a family to support, he is in duty bound to set aside some time of the day and evening for study. For it is written, "Thou shalt meditate therein day and night."¹

¹ Samuel M. Blumenfeld, "Adult Education in the Jewish Community." Address before Conference of Adult Education, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, Summer, 1938.