

It's Time to Specialize

JAMES POLING

There was a time when I would have argued that the institutional church should be disbanded and completely reorganized. However, I have gained some appreciation of the traditional forms of church life, inadequate though they are. Yet, local churches continue to major in trivia. They make no difference in the crucial issues confronting citizens in today's world. I have decided not to go into the residential parish because there are more important ministries. The church must support these broader ministries if it is to be relevant.

THE RESIDENTIAL PARISH AS IT NOW EXISTS

In order to understand the new directions in which the church is moving, we will look first at the strengths and the weaknesses of the residential parish as it now exists.

The local church should continue its ministry to the family. In spite of all the changes which have occurred in the family recently, it remains the basic unit of our society. Men get their main motivation to work from the need to support their families. Mothers and children get their main identity and sense of worth from the family. Therefore, the ministry to the family in the forms of Christian education, fellowship, and worship should be continued by the residential parish.

However, many churches merely have the pretension of ministering to the family. Activities for all the members of the family do not create a ministry to the family. Often the church is just one more place where the members of the family are separated and alienated from one another. If this ministry is one of the unique aspects of the church, then more relevant forms must be found. Often the church merely puts a sugarcoating over the family and leaves it in its sickness.

There is much criticism of the local church because of the restrictions placed upon the pastor. Many young men refuse to go into the pastorate because of the expectations surrounding this job. If the pastor pushes certain issues in his congregation, he is threatened by a dwindling membership or maybe a loss of his job. His major task, they say, is to increase the membership, raise the budget, and keep everyone happy.

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There is no doubt that expectations are placed upon a pastor, but this is true for every job. If a pastor is honest with the expectations, he may discover that he has more freedom than other professionals do. A pastor is called not just to respond to the membership and keep the institution going but also to be a prophet of the gospel in both his words and his actions. His responsibility to the gospel frees him from the legalism of the expectations surrounding his job.

Many pastors reflect only the expectations of their congregations rather than the truth of the gospel. Pastors concentrate heavily on the individual ethic. Much emphasis is put on individual decision, and ethical problems revolve around how the individual responds to the ambiguities of life around him. There is very little emphasis on the ways in which groups can control their environment. There are sometimes sermons on social issues, but the response usually is "What can I, as one individual, do?" People are encouraged to write to their Congressmen and other politicians, but very seldom is group action recommended. Local churches need to learn the meaning of corporate responsibility. Writing to a Congressman is fine, but more effective is a visit to his office by a group that is of one mind on a specific problem. If there is no response to this, then some plan of action for dramatizing the issue may be appropriate. The local church can be a logical base for this type of direct action.

Pastors and congregations have accustomed themselves to a trivial use of the various forms of ministry. Preaching and worship can be a tremendous rallying point for social action. In fact, the secular equivalents of these forms are found in most groups which are oriented toward social action. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference makes wide use of the mass rally in which people are "fired up" by a preacher and then urged to go out and act. But in most local churches, preaching and worship have become some type of pseudocleansing ritual which only increases the guilt feelings of the congregation. Teaching and fellowship are also legitimate forms, but are often structured so that they serve to limit the group. The problem is that the forms have been separated from the mission of the congregation, and the group is paralyzed.

Outreach means sending money to some group outside the local church. Money is sent to Brethren Service or foreign missions, but none of this outreach money is used to hire staff for a detached ministry "across the tracks." Witness raises the question, "How can I talk about Jesus at school?" Or, it means bringing more members to the church school. Witness should mean becoming involved in some type of program which makes a difference in the community. The use of the traditional forms of ministry must be reevaluated in the light of the church's mission to the world.

A strength of the residential parish is that it forms the base of power of the institutional church. In spite of all the limitations of the church it does

have organizational strength which must be considered. Without the finances and the membership of local churches there would be no force such as the Church of the Brethren. This strength has not always been used to the best advantage, but the church must have power in today's world if it is to make a difference.

The problem with institutional strength is that it often becomes conservative. A major concern of the church has been the preservation of the institution itself. It makes sense that when people invest themselves in an institution as big as many local churches they want to preserve it. Much money and time is spent in maintaining the church building and the membership to sustain it. Much money is sent to the denomination to continue its program.

However, the church ceases to be the church when its major concern is the preservation of its own institution. Christ did not come to found the church but to save the world. The church was not formed to serve its members, but to provide a means through which the salvation of the world could be accomplished. The primary purpose of the church must always be kept in the foreground. The church was formed to participate in God's mission in the world. It cannot afford to get "hung up" in the big business of buildings. It cannot afford to dwell on the importance of membership. The church must always be centered around mission, which means constantly moving outside itself to work in the world.

Meanwhile, the church being what it is now, I have decided not to go into the parish ministry. Local churches do not confront people on the crucial issues surrounding their lives. They do not have programs which make a difference on the war-and-peace question. They do not overcome the bigotry of most middle-class Americans concerning minority groups. They do not make any difference in the politics of our world. They do nothing to free us from the economic exploitation by the big corporations of our country. There is nothing wrong with most local churches except that they are irrelevant to the most important problems of man today.

The problem of war and peace is perhaps the most critical issue of our time because of the real possibility of man's destruction of himself. This problem has been discussed in detail since World War Two when nuclear weapons were first used. But there remain strong groups who seem to prefer this destruction to a changing of their ways.

The position of the Church of the Brethren has been clear on this issue. Our statements in favor of peace are as strong as those of any other denomination. We have dealt with the draft question, and we have sent workers to the war-torn countries.

But we need to evaluate our action in terms of the powerful political and economic war machine which operates in our country. Are our programs as radical as our statements? They pose little threat to the military

program which our country has set upon. We need a team of specialists developing programs for combating the pressure for war.

In taking a serious stand for peace, many young ministers have difficulty justifying a vocation in the residential parish. If they go into the pastorate, they doom themselves to a low level of influence in relation to our war machine. This does not negate the validity of the residential parish, but it does relegate it to second importance between alternatives.

Another issue, which some have named as the most critical of our time, is racial conflict. James Bevel, of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, says that the hidden agenda of all American domestic and foreign policy is racism. There is enough evidence to make this analysis frightening. The racism of South Africa is obvious, but many feel that the United States has only a more sophisticated variety of the same racism.

I am convinced after working one year in the Chicago slums that racial tensions cannot be confronted realistically in a white residential parish. Without a historical understanding of the Negro and firsthand experience of the frustration of his life in America, one can only make pious-sounding statements. These statements are immediately contradicted by the fact that we have reared our children in segregated neighborhoods.

Several of us have chosen ministries in Negro communities because we feel that the church must be directly involved in this problem. Working indirectly from the pulpit of an unconcerned parish is not significant.

Specialists are needed in politics as representatives of the church. There is a real question whether or not democratic institutions can survive the onslaught of technology and the increasing centralization of government and business. The myth of George Orwell's *1984* may not be very farfetched with the progressive sophistication of bugging devices. The Federal government is assuming more and more power since the states have shown their inability to deal with local problems. It is doubtful now that an individual can participate in government unless he is representative of a group which has a strong power base. We need specialists with the power base of the church and a knowledge of the complexities of politics. A young man who is concerned about the politics of our nation and the world will probably not choose a parish ministry because he would lack a power base and the time to become a trained politician.

An issue which the church has not yet faced realistically is the concentration of power in the business and financial world. Every day we are bombarded with hundreds of advertisements about every conceivable product. Our lives are based more and more on the ultimacy of the materialism which keeps our economy booming. The decisions about which products we will buy and how much we will pay for them are made in various offices across the country, and we are the victims of their propaganda. There is an increasing need of the church's presence in the circles where such deci-

sions are made. But ministers to corporation presidents cannot be amateurs with a vague idea of what needs to be done. They must be specialists with a knowledge of economics and a good grounding in theology. A general practitioner from a residential parish cannot achieve the technical ability to be accepted where such decisions are made.

Poverty is an issue which has received national prominence lately through the Federal Economic Opportunity Program. Many of us are familiar with urban poverty which imprisons people in economic and geographical ghettos. But rural poverty is a more embarrassing issue to the Church of the Brethren. In some of the worst poverty pockets in rural America, there are Brethren parishes whose presence has made little difference in the living conditions of the people. Rural parishes in poverty areas have no attraction for good ministers and the denomination has done little to change this situation. Again, we need specialists in poverty problems who are trained and financially supported to work in these areas. They could work as pastors, but also as community organizers, trying to change the structural system of these communities.

Each of these issues requires a radical response by men who are trained and filled with a passion for making our society more Christian. We must be involved in ministries which are incarnations of our beliefs. Too long have we been involved only in study groups which resulted in public statements and Annual Conference resolutions. We need specialists, not only in preaching, teaching, and counseling, but also in politics, economics, community organizing, and city planning.

God is active in all of the areas of man's life. But there are special historical implications to what he is doing in the power centers of the world. Important decisions are being made which will determine the destiny of history and the lives of all of us. The church must be there witnessing to God's power and willing to give of its life that his will may be realized.

Our society and our world need change. From the perspective of the church, our society must change in order to become more Christian. From a purely practical point of view, our society must change if we are to preserve our basic way of life. We need to open the closed-housing market which restricts Negroes to ghetto slums in order to preserve democracy. If justice is to be preserved we need to end the full-employment myth which keeps one fourth of our population in poverty. We need to rid ourselves of the war machine, because its continued existence endangers the possibility for peace. But these kinds of changes are not accomplished by moral suasion or detailed studies by persons of goodwill. They are accomplished by the organized power of groups which creates structural change in the society itself. The church must learn how to develop and use political and economic power to bring about the kind of society in which people are free to be human. The development and the right use of power require dedi-

cated and trained ministers who know the present power structure and understand the goals of the Kingdom of God. The church must become wiser in its use of power if it really claims to make a difference in today's world.

There are several ways in which the church can develop and use power. One is community organization. The church should be involved in organizing racial minority groups and poverty groups to demand their full participation in this society. If our democratic structures are worth saving, then they must be forced to respond to the needs of all the people. This means organizing people who are not represented in our system of government into political and economic units who can demand their recognition as human beings and as citizens. An example of community organization is the development of tenant unions. Tenants in our large cities have long been the victims of the political machines and the real-estate industry. Through their banding together, they are preparing to demand from both the governments and the real-estate industry decent places to live. The development of tenant unions has become a point of great tension because it is upsetting the way things have been done for centuries, especially in the area of property rights. But these structures of society must change. Hopefully out of this tension will come a more nearly just tenant-landlord relationship.

The detached-worker program is another way in which the church can develop and use power. This program is primarily with people who are outside the church, and often with organized gangs of teen-agers. There are many problems in dealing with this group because they have chosen violence to express their hostility toward a society which they believe is phony. However, their presence demonstrates a disease in our culture. A conscious attempt needs to be made to redirect the energy of these teen-agers toward more creative goals and at the same time use their power base as a way to change the society.

There is a great need of industrial chaplaincies. Ministers who are trained in theology and in economics need to be present with the executives who make many of the decisions which affect all of society. The church needs to be there raising questions of ethics in a world where money is often the only ethic.

There are other forms of ministry which have been and will be designed to meet specific needs. When these become a more accepted part of the church's program, many talented young men will be attracted to the ministry, and at the same time the residential parish will be strengthened.

THE FIRST CHURCH, CHICAGO

The story of the First Church of the Brethren in Chicago can serve as a parable of the possibilities of ministry besides those of the traditional

residential parish. There is disagreement about what actually has happened at First Church. Some believe that First Church has done the wrong thing. This account will necessarily be from my perspective even though I know there is not a consensus of interpretation.

Fifteen years ago First Church in Chicago was generally typical of a residential parish although it was unusual in some ways. It was located in an urban setting, and the presence of Bethany Seminary meant that there was much talent in the congregation. The program was traditional with a prominent worship service, a large Christian education program, and other educational and fellowship groups.

Two things happened which changed the character of First Church. First, during the fifties the community around First Church became all Negro, as real-estate dealers exploited both whites and Negroes in order to make a profit. Second, the seminary moved to the western suburbs, taking with it much of the past leadership of the church. During this transition period, First Church decided to remain in the same location in spite of the obvious problems which it faced. Various experiments were tried in an attempt to minister in the community, which was called East Garfield Park. Things were difficult because of the cultural differences between the Brethren and the Negroes, many of whom were recent emigrants from the South to urban Chicago. Educational and club programs were designed to meet the immediate needs of the community. However, the problems of housing, income, and education were so crucial that these programs made little difference. Community people, seeing the futility of this approach, failed to respond in more than a token way. As the number of whites in the membership dwindled they were replaced by only a few community people. Between 1950 and 1965, the membership dropped from eight hundred to one hundred seventy-five. The budget dropped to the point where, even with the support of the General Brotherhood Board, there was just enough money to pay staff and maintain the property. At the rate of decline in membership and finances, First Church would be dead in less than five years.

At this point, First Church was faced with a major decision. One choice was to maintain the same type of program in the hope that something would happen which would make the church relevant. The other choice was to begin the more radical ministry of social action with the chance that new life would arise in the church. First Church chose the second route, knowing full well that there was a large risk involved.

In the fall of 1965, a new staff member was hired to design and begin an educational program which made sense in terms of the problems in the community. This program has developed into the daily use of the church building for tutoring programs, a study library, a preschool program, a cooking class, a sewing class, etc. The church is being used by many people every day in these programs. Children and adults from the community have

responded to capacity. Leaders have come from the community and from sister churches in the suburbs. Participation in weekday programs is probably as significant as at any time in the history of First Church.

At the same time, I left the seminary to take the job as community organizer. My task is to relate myself and First Church to whatever that is important is happening in East Garfield Park.

In the last year, both the pastor and I have been deeply involved in community programs. As we began to work, we became involved with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was beginning its first major campaign outside of the South in East Garfield Park. They stimulated the community to begin a campaign to "end slums." We were there when the East Garfield Park Steering Committee was formed. We were there when the structure for the Union to End Slums was adopted. This "union" would include all of the residents of East Garfield Park in a unit which hopefully would become a political force in the city of Chicago.

I have been involved in numerous programs which were created to attack the basic causes of slums. Public-aid recipients are being organized into a union to protest the inhumanities of the welfare system. Students are being organized to protest the low quality of education in Negro communities. Homeowners are being organized to protest the discrimination of financial institutions which deny them home loans. Everyone is being organized to protest the bulldozer of Urban Renewal, which is the bigot's solution to racial problems — Urban Removal.

I am closely involved in the organization of tenants into unions so that they can protest the disrespect of the real-estate industry and the city government. Tenants near First Church live in substandard housing, often without the minimal services of garbage collection, heat, and janitorial service. For this type of housing they pay thirty to fifty percent of their monthly income. We have had some limited success in applying collective pressure on some of the larger landlords. By the use of rent strikes, we have gotten some improvements in the buildings and a new respect for the tenant who has no legal rights. However, we are a long way from the solution of this problem, which involves the financial institutions, the city government, the welfare system, the school system, etc. Nothing short of a full attack on all the facets of slumism will change the structure. First Church is involved in this attack.

Questions have been raised about whether the function of the church is to be involved in the power struggles of self-interested groups on the political scene.

I answer that the church must be involved in struggles for social justice if it is the church. Individuals are the product of the society in which they live. This is especially clear in East Garfield Park, where working with individuals is an endless and frustrating process. No amount of knowledge

about financing can help a family of seven learn to live on two hundred fifty dollars a month in the city. Rent usually takes from forty to fifty percent of this money, which means that the children must go without food or clothes. No amount of ingenuity can make a nice apartment out of three rooms where seven people live if the landlord does not provide heat and rodent control. Even the smartest child becomes frustrated in a school where six thousand students are crowded into a building which was built for two thousand and which has inadequate teachers and books. These problems cannot be solved by individual counseling and education. The income of the poor must be raised if they are to live decently. The homes of the poor must be standard if children are to develop properly. New schools must be built and more teachers recruited if students are to escape the cycle which has imprisoned their parents. These changes involve structural changes in the society. The most relevant ministry is to help people organize so that they can protest their conditions and take their places as human beings and citizens in an affluent society.

I have chosen to be a community organizer because I believe that this is one of the most-needed ministries in today's world. I have chosen this work also because I believe that this is the direction in which the church is moving. The church will become more and more involved at the point where men in this world are making decisions. We live on the frontier of a new age, and the church will change as the world demands new ministries of the group that confesses Christ as Lord.



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