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The Village Church

Earl Clement Davis

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The only accurate yardstick thus far devised for measuring the work of a church, so far as I know, consists of memberships and budgets. Figures tell the final story. And judged on such a basis, a Unitarian church in a rural community would have to be written off as a noble experiment. I cannot, of course, speak for those with whom it has been my privilege to worship and work. And as for myself, I am not unmindful of the fact that emphasis upon intangibles is sometimes made by those who feel most keenly the sting of defeat. Nevertheless, I must say that I have found adequate compensation for labor expended in the hope, if not the faith, that the riches that have come to me from some of these experiences may have been shared by the other fellow.

THE VILLAGE CHURCH

By EARL C. DAVIS

Minister, First Parish (Unitarian), Petersham, Mass.

THE title of a current book, *We Cannot Escape History*, has searching implications. A village church is the product of an historic process. It inherits a great tradition, but it functions in the midst of a rapidly changing environment. What is its nature? What has it contributed to individuals and to the community? What may it do to fulfill its mission in our time? There is no general formula, but experiences offer suggestions.

First of all consider the name of a village church: "The First Congregational Parish in Hilltown, Unitarian." The words are the stigmata on the body of its corporate life. They reveal its origin and its growth in and with the community where it was first gathered as "The Church of Christ in Hilltown." We know that it is not the source of religion, but rather the channel through which people have sought to understand and interpret in terms of current life the religious thought and practise of the ages. We may not know much about "The Sovereignty of God" and we may be a little careless in our use of language, but we have learned much by living so close to the land. On our farms and in our gardens we have shared in the productive process of nature. We have learned that we live in the midst of powerful and constant forces. We have learned that we may work with them, and, to a small degree, may come to understand them, but that we cannot escape their exacting standards. Either by the way of education and training or by the "hard way" we know that "The Will" of those forces must be discovered and obeyed or we perish.

We meditate upon this exacting process of which human beings are at once products and transmitting agents—first the blade, then the ear, and then the fertile grain in the ear. Just how we may not know, but the fertile fruit of the past contains the promise of harvests to come. Somehow the village church—the buildings and all the imponderable associations—becomes both a symbol and the witness of a faith, imperfect and somewhat vague perhaps, that our human lives, even amid the wrecked harvest of a

tragic era, are the fertile seeds that promise the harvest of a better age to come. This irresistible momentum of human life, call it the spirit of God in the soul of man if you wish, registers in some human lives as a compelling conviction that has been the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night in the long trek through history.

The primary function of the village church, as indeed of all churches, is to be aware of this quality in human life, to understand its meaning, to stimulate its development in the lives of persons and in the community. This is the essential soul of a church, and it cannot be sacrificed for the advantages of the hour.

How effectively village churches have done their work is a difficult thing to measure. On the whole the record is good. Changes are taking place. The natural boundaries of travel and communication that once made the village a fairly snug and isolated community are being obliterated. We not only feel the impact of the great currents of modern life, but we go forth to share in the hazards and adventures involved. The telephone, the automobile, the radio, moving pictures, the chain stores and the airplane have immeasurably enlarged the range and the interest of our lives. These great forces register in the village life in very intimate and personal ways. At the present moment their influence is accentuated by the exigencies of the war. In addition to the imponderable changes that the war is producing we feel in a very intimate way the impact of these forces upon persons and homes: ten per cent of the population in service; forty names of men and women on the Honor Roll of one village church; almost every available man and woman at work in factories. "Lloyd was in the battle of Bougainville"; "Roger is in Italy"; "Horace sent a cable from England"; "Arthur is in Alaska"; "Charles received a D.S.C. in New Guinea"; "Herbert goes tomorrow"—members of the village church; they sang in the choir, went to the church school, danced at the socials. They are our boys—flesh of our flesh, spirit of our spirit. Not to be forgotten are our girls. We may not fully understand their restlessness. They miss "their boys," their mates at school, their partners in gay and rollicking dances, their companions in the village life. We may forget, I fear, that back of this restlessness, this waiting for letters at the village postoffice, are profound forces not to be treated lightly, but reverently and with deep understanding. When the question comes as to how effectively and by what methods a village church is meeting the demands of the day, and actually stirring to conviction an active faith in the worth and the universal significance of a human being, the answer is very difficult. A generation hence someone may be able to determine how wisely and devotedly the work is being done. The older people in the village church may be rolling along on the momentum of the past. These younger ones, boys and girls who are really carrying the burdens of the day, here in their anxiety, there in the turmoil of conflict, what are we actually saying to them—not in words, but in the spirit and reality of our lives? What in turn will they say to us?

Of course the village church strives to maintain a

high standard of public worship; to take advantage of every opportunity to provide for the healthy growth of the religious life of its children; to keep itself well informed in all matters belonging to its own life; to make its contribution to the community in which it lives; to reach out for fellowship with and a share in the mission of liberal religion in the world. There is no rule of thumb for all these organized efforts. Some of them have come into existence to meet a continued need. Others arise to satisfy a temporary necessity. They are the expressions of the vital processes of growing life. They should contain the seed of the better harvest.

But do they? Perhaps hints come now and then as to what is going on deep in the minds of people concerning these matters of religious thought and practise. Why do young people want to stand alone in the village church to be married by its minister? Why do they bring their children from distant cities to be christened? Why do boys who are going into the Marines and Navy shyly express a desire to become a member of the village church? The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts. One suspects that here are the vital seeds of the great tradition planted in the good soil of youth. As one gets the comeback from conducting services of public worship year in and year out, one cannot escape the conviction that here, whether in the great festival services like Christmas and Easter, or in the usual Sunday services, there is the vital seed of promise that lifts the life of the individual to the plane of its universal consecration. The integrity of individuals so touched, and a sense of the integrity of the family and domestic life, are the seeds of promise, even in a war-torn world. To this the village church bears witness.

LETTER FROM LONDON

THIS is the first of a series of monthly letters that Mr. Fritchman and I propose to exchange between *The Inquirer* and *The Christian Register*. *The Inquirer* already has received from Mr. Fritchman the first of his letters and it will have appeared in *The Inquirer* long before this reaches *The Christian Register*. In London, during the war, we have had a number of moving contacts with our American co-religionists. We have met and heard Dr. Robert Dexter and Dr. Charles Joy. The meetings were not ordinary events for those who had the privilege. Through your representatives, engaged upon their magnificent work in Lisbon, we felt ourselves in touch with the living faith of our brethren in America. It is not too much to say that without effort, or thought of effort, Dr. Dexter and Dr. Joy each became one of us; and that was a splendid feeling; indeed it is only when thinking the matter over that one is conscious of any need to think of those two brethren as different from us!

I have been moved too, as editor of *The Inquirer*, by my various contacts through the written word with Unitarians in America. It never ceases to be a strange

wonder to me that although men can be separated by thousands of miles, grow up in a different environment, never meet one another, yet suddenly through the written word they discover they have known one another from the beginning. If ever there were a proof of the universality of thought and feeling this is it. It places all differences in their right perspective. That American Unitarians and British Unitarians should be *Unitarian*, that is to say share like thoughts and feelings discovered in partial isolation from their fellows, is an extraordinary matter. "The wind bloweth where it listeth and you hear the sound thereof, but whence it cometh and whither it goeth no man knows."

Mr. Fritchman has probably shared with me the desire to make this unexpressed unity more real in conscious thought through new and effective contacts. We want to heal this world of ours. We want to join with those, close to us in spirit, in the healing. We want to create a world where the misunderstandings of space and the lost opportunities of human fellowship shall no longer mar all that is dearest and most precious to us. We desire to use every opportunity we can to know and understand.

There are many great schemes abroad now for international fellowship and human betterment; they can all be worked upon enthusiastically. But whilst we are working there is no reason why we should not cultivate at the same time the simple ordinary things of human fellowship; share our interests; learn the richness of brotherhood through the universality of our particular religious experiences, and through the little things that flow from those greater ones.

This letter is by way of introduction. I shall write alternate letters, one on general matters and one on Unitarian domestic matters. Like you in America we are wrestling with internal matters of reconstruction in our own church life. We are preparing for the days when we shall have to seize the opportunity to rebuild and move forward with the help of those young men and women who will return from the forces. On this I will write in my next letter. Greetings to all the readers of *The Christian Register*.

E. G. LEE

Editor, *The Inquirer* (Unitarian),
London, England

The Register Recommends:

MOVIES

None Shall Escape (Columbia) with Marcia Hunt, Alexander Knox and Henry Travers. The theme of postwar trials appears with considerable eloquence.

Destination Tokyo (Warner Brothers) with Cary Grant and John Garfield. The first authoritative movie based on the submarine in this war. Social content: excellent.

DRAMA

Decision by Edward Chodorov. A fearless play on American Fascism.

S. H. F.

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By EARL C. DAVIS

Minister, First Parish (Unitarian), Petersham, Massachusetts

The Christian Register, Unitarian, March 1944, Volume 123, Number 3, pages 92-93

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