

Directions Toward A Church of the People

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It is a matter of both shrewdness and faithfulness that we reflect on what or who creates the community of Jesus Christ which we call the Church. It is a matter of shrewdness because the mainline churches in the United States are on the decline if measured by the commonly accepted measurements: number of people and amount of money. It is a matter of faithfulness because the mainline churches may not be at all adequate to or in conformity with the original purpose of the Christian Church. And this, of course, would be an infinitely worse decline than the former. We should be shrewd enough to sense when our efforts and our institutional creations have been either unresponsive or irrelevant to many people in our urban society. But such shrewdness is liable to lead only to further vain efforts if it is not informed by our faithfulness to the power which can alone bring the Church into being, that is, the transcendent grace and power of God in Jesus Christ.

The main issue we are facing today is whether and how we can work in churches which for four and a half centuries have understood themselves as “church *for* the people” in order to bring about a “church *of* the people.” It is clear in countries like the United States and West Germany that more and more people are less and less interested in a church that understands itself as “tending” to the religious needs of people. The church that is geographically and hierarchically defined takes care of the people by deciding doctrines

and programs “from above.” The attending of the people need not mean their full and responsible participation in and governance of the church, but rather it can mean that they merely come to support or purchase whatever is required to meet the religious needs that have been instilled in them. But the point is that an increasing number of people no longer feel the need to be tended and thus to attend. This causes a certain frantic consciousness in those professionals who, because of their professional identity, do feel responsible for the church. And they commit themselves to all manner of ostensibly shrewd programs to save the church.

The Church For The People

But what is the “church” they are seeking to save? Very often it is only the social and institutional forms of the “church *for* the people.” This style church had its historical beginning around 1525 in Wittenberg when the church became closely associated with the princes in the governance of the German “lands.” It was not long before the features of this church hardened into institutional forms which are still with us today — even in the mainline churches which have “congregational” or “free church” traditions behind them. The “parish” church came to have first of all a geographical definition: the Christian congregation and the civil community have generally the same boundaries. Town hall and church building constitute the center of a well-defined territory. Today we still go

about establishing new congregations by first determining a viable geographical unit which the church can "serve" and realistically "cover."

After the geographical definition comes the demographic or parochial definition: the church district has the same inhabitants as the residential district. The Greek word from which we derive "parish" and "parochial" is *paroikos*, which means "one who lives beyond the house" or "stranger." It was a term which was surely assigned to early Christians in a derogatory way. But they accepted it as appropriate, since they knew that their home could not be identified with a soil, a land, or a geographic district of this world. But in a racist, sexist, and classist society this significance of "parish" is lost. The parish is very often not the place where the strangers, the radically different people, can come together through the grace and power of Jesus Christ. Rather geographic and residential definitions of the church create parishes in which everyone is alike and the stranger finds no turf for himself or herself.

Finally, the geographically and demographically defined parish comes under a temporal definition: the church year is the calendar year. The rhythm and flow of life in the church is ordered by the measurement of time in society as a whole.

Under these three definitions the church understands itself as existing for the care (and control) of the people who fall within these definitions. Faith means participation in the religious events and the business of ecclesiastical tending and attending. In a church that takes care of the people it will be assumed that *authority* comes from the top. Consequently it will be assumed that *responsibility* comes from the top.

And thus we are back at our point: more and more people are less and less

interested in a church which only takes care of them and in whose life and future they have no vital stake. They are bored by a parish in which everyone is alike and which simply reflects the kind of social environment they find everywhere else in society. More often than not they are also bored by all the activities of the church. They vaguely realize that many of these activities are simply means of maintaining the very institutional structures which made the parish boring and cold in the first place. Even social relevance and social action can become boring when there is not created at the same time the new humanity in which the radically different people can suddenly embrace.

As we have become increasingly aware of this general malaise in the mainline churches over the last several decades, it seems to me that we have been frantically engaged in finding ever more sophisticated ways to restore and shore up the very institutional structures of the parish church which may be the chief causes of its decline. The new humanity in Jesus Christ, the Church, will always have to be institutionalized in order to live from today until tomorrow. But nothing in the institutionalization of the church is absolutely invariable. What is invariable is our calling to be faithful to the transcendent grace and power of God in Jesus Christ. This means that our institutionalization of the church should correspond to this transcendent reality which has brought us into being as the Church. It means that we do not have to be anxious about saving this and that aspect of the institutions but rather we are actually called in every new time and place to find the new social and institutional forms which authentically derive from what God in Jesus Christ is doing to create the new humanity among us.

A German Parallel

The significance of this was impressed upon me when I visited some churches and seminaries in East Germany in the summer of 1975. In East Germany the old parish "church for the people," the old institutional church with its geographical, demographical, and calendric definitions, is dead or is in its last death-throes. No new church buildings may be constructed in the newly-settled urban districts which are meant to be models of the socialist future. The church is, therefore, forced to find new models of building up community, totally different from what has been known in the institutional parish church of the last 450 years. The *Volkskirche*, the "church for the people," has no future because it has no place in the official geographic, demographic, and calendric space of appearances. Christians have been forced to learn that the social and institutional forms of the church are not what is essential and invariable about the Church.

In Magdeburg, Halle, and Erfurt I met pastors and lay persons who were facing the demise of the *Volkskirche*, not with bitterness and resignation but with great expectation. That is, to be sure, not a universal experience. There is a deep, debilitating despair among many Christians in East Germany. But there are those who believe in the power of the *viva vox evangelii* (the living voice of the gospel) and look for the future which the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness of his people can bring. They consider this time of seemingly small possibilities to be an opportunity for the Church to become more faithful. These highly energetic and innovative Christians are experimenting with house churches in which they are employing the theological and organizational insights of the so-called "Christian basis congregation," a movement which is particularly wide-spread in South

America. The success of these groups in bringing together people of all ages and backgrounds, in and out of the Party, is the most exciting thing I witnessed on my trip to the German Democratic Republic.

While in the last thirty years the church in the GDR has been almost totally dependent on Western psychological and social sciences in its practice of ministry, one gets the impression that much will be learned from experience in this situation that will be of importance for us in the imminent decision we shall also have to make about our *Volkskirche* ("church for the people"). The new Christian communities in East Germany do not have a geographic, demographic, or calendric definition. Therefore they do not have a consciousness of rule through "taking care of" the people. Nor do they have a vertical hierarchy in which authority and responsibility come from the top. Rather the community is formed "from the bottom up" out of people who are radically different from each other.

These groups are experimenting with proclamation as encounter and conversation. The heart of the community's life is serious biblical study which begins with the critical personal, social, and even political questions of the members instead of beginning with and being limited to historical-critical questions, on the one hand, or "fundamental", dogmatic questions, on the other hand. They consistently try to insert communal care and counseling into the liturgy and vice versa. The governing idea is to enable the people to create its own community and to take full responsibility for its own church.

Luther's Alternative

I believe that these experiments in faith and hope which are going on in East Germany may help us to renew our Reformation traditions. The faithful

practice of these East German Christians reminds one of Martin Luther's "Introduction to the German Mass" (1526), in which he claimed that there were three kinds of services. The first is the Latin Mass which had to be maintained for the "instruction" (!) of the youth and the common people who have not made a firm and lasting confession. The second is the German Order of Service which is to be introduced for the "simple laymen" who were not yet strong and consistent in their confession. And then Luther turns to his description of the third alternative. "The third kind of service which a truly Evangelical Church Order should have would . . . be held for those who mean to be real Christians and profess the Gospel with hand and mouth. They would record their names on a list and meet by themselves in some house in order to pray, read, baptize, receive the Sacrament and do other Christian works . . . Here one could also establish a common benevolent fund among Christians, which should be

willingly given and distributed among the poor, according to the example of St. Paul, II Cor. 9. The many and elaborate chants would be unnecessary. There could be a short, appropriate Order for Baptism and the Sacrament and everything centered on the Word and Prayer and Love . . . In short, if one had the people and persons who wanted to be Christians in fact, the rules and regulations could be easily supplied" (*Works of Martin Luther*, The Philadelphia Edition, Vol. VI, p. 173).

Unfortunately Luther went on to say that he did not have or observe around him "the persons necessary to accomplish" this third alternative, which stresses the power of God's Word to create a "Church of the people" from the bottom up. Wherever our brothers and sisters are practicing this *third way* we should be extremely attentive. Their witness could be our incentive to recognize those around us "who mean to be real Christians" and to begin anew the faithful formation of our churches for a shrewd ministry to the world.

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