

"AN INCOMPLETE CRUSADE"

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring of 1963, this congregation joined with other Methodist congregations across the New York area and set forth on a bold, ambitious financial crusade to raise some five million dollars for worthy causes to meet the pressing, urgent needs of people in our urbanized society. At that time, our own Church accepted an asking of \$16,000 as its share in this undertaking. Many of you at that time indicated your support of this venture through gifts and pledges.

Now, some two and a half years later, we see that what was started then has not yet been completed. As a Conference, we stand at the half-way mark. And as a Church, we stand below the one-third mark of that which we were asked to give. What has been received thus far represents sacrificial giving to the needs of our brothers, and for what has been received, we are truly grateful. The adventures we dreamed of are slowly becoming realities. The leadership of Methodism in this area, deeply aware of the continuing need, has decided to make one great effort at this time to encourage our people to complete what we have started. Originally, a three year program, it is now being extended through 1967 in hopes of achieving victory and reaching the goal.

Therefore, I come before you this morning, as do my ministerial colleagues in some 500 or more Methodist churches in this area come before their congregations, to speak to you about this Crusade - to remind you that it is for people, old people, young people, people in the depressed areas of the cities, people in communities in the formative stage - to remind you especially that the church in the city stands today at the cross-roads, that unless we stop playing games and get down to some real effort, the influence of the church and the way of life it represents in our urbanized society is bound to diminish.

DEVELOPMENT

There is a line in Luke's Gospel (it comes near the end of the last chapter), that I should like to put before you this morning in the way of a text. Jesus was talking to his disciples and said this to them:

"You are my witnesses of these things. And behold I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high".

Perhaps somewhat out of context, we use the words to call attention to the pressing needs of the city in this present hour. In a profound sense, the needs of the church for spiritual revitalization and the need of the city for redemption are linked together. Unless the contemporary city church is filled with the power of Christ's redeeming love, its physical presence in the city is but a futile gesture. "You are my witnesses" "Stay in the city...." Suppose we think about the city and the church here this morning....

CHURCH AND CITY

A teacher best works where there is ignorance. A doctor best serves where there is sickness. A gambler goes "where the action is". The church today also has a widely recognized and demanding area of operation. And that area of urgent action is the city. It is in the city, in the midst of the raucous, powerful, churning agglomerations of modern cities. For this is where the people are, in swelling proportions, and there, too, are the hubs of influence which largely dominate tastes, standards, habits, values and value judgments of the entire nation. Dr. Sockman was so right when he said "As this city goes, so goes the nation".

To many, the American city is a fearful thing - as they say, "A good place to visit, but a terrible place to live". High, sprawling, temptuous, today's metropolis contains more people, more industry, more congestion, more crime, more sheer human activity than ever before. In fact, the American city contains more of everything except the one institution which, throughout history, has given continuity to man's culture and comfort to his soul. And that institution is the church!

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Curiously enough, it was in the cities of the ancient world where New Testament Evangelists concentrated their efforts - in the throbbing cities, not the placid outskirts. Christianity took root and grew, not out in isolation somewhere, or on the fringes of town, but in the teeming urban centers where "truths and values are most on trial". ~~The New Testament churches got rooted~~ in the biggest and most wicked cities of their day - Rome, rife with pervisions, court plots and murders; Ephesus, site of the Temple to the pagan goddess Diana with its fertility cults and prostitution; Corinth, jammed with taverns and often called the most sinful city of the ancient world.

But unfortunately, Protestant Christianity has tended to shy away from the city. Our churches have tended to withdraw to the nearby cow pastures, congesting ~~instead~~ on quiet side streets, in stable, respectable suburbs, in pleasant small towns with serene settings, equating faith with peaceful goodness, blue skies, green lawns, well-scrubbed faces, trusted neighbors, middle class goals. The church has been retreating from the city, retreating at precisely the moment that the cities have needed the churches the most, and mind you the mortality has been severe. In Boston, for instance, five Methodist churches died in ten years, leaving only five surviving in the inner city. In Washington, fourteen Methodist Churches moved out within the last 20 years. And according to an article that appeared some time ago in the National Observer, Chicago has lost more than 150 churches, Cleveland 72, Detroit 63, and New York City - 300 churches - all within the last twenty years. These are disturbing statistics!

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the Church of All Nations on the lower east side of Manhattan. Some of you are. Last spring a group of our ladies had operation to visit that church and witness its unique program of service to the community - seven days a week. Marvellous. But did you know that the Church of All Nations is the successor of 14 Methodist churches that once served that general area of the city. They were either merged, or closed, and their assets used for the Church of All Nations. To be sure, strategic withdrawal and consolidation is sometimes a necessity. However, this must never be permitted to become the habitual stance of the church. The key words of the Christian enterprise across the centuries have been "mission" - "advance" - "onward".

WHY THE RETREAT? You may ask - why has the church retreated? You know the answers as well as I do. They do not make us feel comfortable. Neighborhood population changes more often than not have been the factor. Changes have occurred in which a white, Protestant constituency has moved out as a non-Protestant, perhaps non-Christian, occasionally non-white groups have moved in. Church membership has declined and those who remained behind were unable to carry the financial burden of maintaining both building and ministry. Other reasons may be responsible, but this is one of the main ones.

However, we need to remember that the need to stay and serve and witness in changing areas has never ceased. Social problems have accelerated, delinquency increased as churches moved out. The number of unchurched, spiritually needy people in the community, though more difficult to reach, were there in just as large numbers. In some instances, the church created the Neighborhood House to serve the changing community. In other instances, the church found itself unable to cope with the problem and merged, re-located, or simply closed its doors, sold its property and went out of business.

A speaker at a recent conference had this to say. "We are problem conscious rather than power conscious". It is true that much has been said and written about the problem of the city church. Too frequently, we have overlooked the resources available to meet the problem. "You are my witnesses". "Stay in the city until you are armed with power". This is an imperative to which the church must listen in terms of revitalization and in terms of its mission to bear witness in the difficult place.

THOSE THAT STAYED

Some churches stayed in the city. As we think of the Methodist Churches that "Dug in", that remained, if we were to look into their recent history, I think we would discover that many of them could not have survived without help from the outside, without financial assistance, for instance, from the NY City Society, or from the Conference. This church is an example. This church was receiving mission aid up through 1957 in order to operate. We came very close to being a statistic on a list. A few of you perhaps recall those very lean years back in the mid 1940's when you didn't have a full time minister, when you weren't even sure whether the doors would be open on a Sunday when you came to worship, when it was not at all uncommon to have only a dozen or more assembled for worship. The point is that we could not have survived without outside help. And the churches that have managed to survive, that have stayed on have been rewarded with new opportunities for service. No church, no congregation, no Christian can remain truly Christian and at the same time be unconcerned and aloof from the great need that exists in this day and age. John Donne it was who in 1623 enunciated the meaning of Christian involvement when he wrote:

"Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee".

Harvey Cox in "The Secular City" is trying to tell us that the city is God's gift to the church. And so it is. What a glorious opportunity we are being given. The mixed, striving atmosphere of the secular city is forcing the Christian Church to stop playing at religion and to get down to brass tacks, to cease being a social club and start being the Church of Jesus Christ. The secular city is forcing us to go beyond ladies-aid gossip circles and chit-chat over a cup of tea, and to lose ourselves in something significant. In the heart of the city, with its great pressures, demands and teeming millions, that kind of watered down religion cannot survive. The city is forcing the church to do more than offer silly little games for its young people. If it wants to hold them, it has to begin sharing a bolder kind of gospel - one that leads to active involvement in the name of Christ in the world.

THIS CHURCH AND THE CRUSADE

I do feel that this church is moving in the right direction, but it is moving too slowly and not enough of you are really involved. There is a solid nucleus at the heart of it composed of persons who care and care deeply, who are alert to the opportunities being given to us in this secular city. I only wish that this solid nucleus could be doubled, tripled in size. We have such a great potential. I'm grateful for all that is being done, but so much more can be done. We must work together, and move together....

In frontier days when a new "meeting house" was to be erected, friends from neighboring churches would gather in a work "bee" to get the project started. Much enthusiasm was generated and much accomplished as the people helped each other. In a very real way, this Crusade is an instrument - a tool - by which each of us can help to meet the needs of people in other parishes and places of great need who have undersaken and sacrificially given to a project that can truly be said to be of utmost importance. The enthusiasm generated by mutual help can still work miracles today and it is for this type of miracle that we pray today. We must work together and move together.

And to an extent, we are. The trustees of this church through their investments, for instance, have seen fit to grant a substantial gift of money to purchase the land in the Taft Housing Development at Madison Avenue and 114th Street for the new church that is soon to be built on that site. The first Methodist church in three decades to be built in Manhattan. We must work together and move together. And the day is close at hand when this kind of cooperation will break across denominational boundaries and transcend sectarian differences. It's already happening. Witness the MUST program - Metropolitan Urban Service Training Program - for clergy and laity alike - initiated by a half million dollars of Methodist money, but now becoming an interdenominational venture

with a unique program designed to focus on the needs of the city. MUST. Remember it. And the Church Center at the UN - erected by Methodist people, but being used by all denominations...to further the cause of peace at the heart of the UN

It has been said, "The Crusades of the middle ages failed because the crusaders grew weary". Let this not be the case with this crusade. As a church, we have a ways to go....as Robert Frost puts it, "promises to keep, and many miles to go..." If we had one hundred persons in this parish who were willing to walk a "second mile" in giving to this cause, in giving \$1.00 a week for the next two years, next 104 weeks, we could come close to completing the crusade in this church. I know there are some who will not be able to go that far; others who can and should go much further. But one hundred pledges of one dollar a week for the next 100 weeks would bring us close to keeping "our promise". Are we asking too much?

An imaginary conversation between Jesus and the angel Gabriel, after the ascension, describes Gabriel as asking the Master what plan he had made for completing his work of telling everyone about God's love. Jesus answered: "I asked Peter and James and John and some more of them on earth, to make it the business of their lives to tell others. And the others are to tell others, and the others still others, until every man has heard the message and had his life transformed by it".

Gabriel stood in meditation as though he saw a flaw in the Master's plan. He said, "Yes, but Master, suppose after a while Peter forgets and John loses his enthusiasm, and what if their successors down in the 20th century get so busy or so timid that they do not have the time or the courage to tell the others. What will you then do?"

The voice of Jesus answer quietly and confidently, "I haven't made any other plans. I am counting on them". Remember this, as the ushers now move among you.....

LET US PRAY Thou who hast placed upon us the responsibility of carrying forth thy mission in the world today and in this city, help us not to dissappoint thee. Open our hearts that we may be willing to share in this modern crusade for the needs of people. Give us the courage and the strength to rise up and do our best in the hope that we shall more than meet the demands of this hour. We ask this in the spirit of Christ. Amen

quietly and quickly - to receive pledges from those of you who wish to walk this second mile and share in this crusade and help us - to keep a promise.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

I would remind you that coffee will be served in Fellowship Hall following the service. We invite all of you - both members and visiting friends alike - to come and share in these delightful moments of warmth and good fellowship.

And to those of you who are visitors to the church this day, we extend a word of warm welcome. It is our joy to have you with us. We hope that you will come and worship with us on future occasions. We ask you to do two things:

First - to be free in the offering of your name to us at the door or the coffee hour.

Second - to take a moment before you leave to sign one of our Guest Books.

The chances are that if you do these two things, you will never again feel that you're a stranger in this church.

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We have a number of announcements in the bulletin that we ask you to review. The Young Adult Fellowship will be meeting again this evening. And on Saturday of this coming week, the women of the church will come together for an important session. Note, too, the announcement concerning the Adult Study Opportunity that begins next week and extends through to the 14th of November. The book, *THE SECULAR CITY* will be reviewed and discussed.

I would remind you, too, of the study group that is composed mainly of Young Adults that is meeting every Sunday morning from 9:45 to 10:30 under Mr. Ridout's guidance.

TODAY IS BEING CELEBRATED as Crusade Sunday by all Methodist Churches in this area. You will be hearing more about this in the sermon. Following the sermon, there will be an opportunity for those of you who desire to support this crusade with a special gift or a pledge of support, to do so. The ushers will assist in receiving pledges at that point in the service.

JESUS SAID: It is more blessed to give than to receive. In this spirit, let us worship God with our offering.