

## "OUR MOST URGENT NEED"

### INTRODUCTION

The sermon today and the sermon next Sunday are going to focus directly on the needs of this Park Avenue Methodist Church. I hesitate to some degree to preach a sermon that concerns primarily this parish for I recognize that there are usually some people here from other parts of the country who are not members of this Church. But I do this on occasion, however, when I feel it is right and necessary always hoping that our visitors will translate what is said into terms of their own church loyalties. The title of this sermon is "Our Most Urgent Need".

### DEVELOPMENT

To begin with, it might very well appear to the casual observer who comes to worship here on a Sunday morning that this Park Avenue Methodist Church really doesn't need anything: anything, that is, over and above those things that only God can give it. It might appear to such a person that our church does not need any more people for the sanctuary on most Sundays is nicely filled. (Parenthetically, I might just add this, however: there is still room down front, and it would be a nice feeling to see people sitting in the balcony on Sundays other than Easter). It might appear to this same person that we do not need any money for one seldom hears financial matters introduced into the worship service. (We do this only once a year). If this visitor has opportunity to look around the church building, he will see that we do not need a new building for our property is in good condition. He might feel that we do need to steam clean the front of the church and refinish the outer doors - two projects, incidentally, that we hope to be able to do in 1964 providing we underwrite the budget. It might appear to the visitor that we do not need anything more in the way of music for our choir provides us with good music, excellent music, Sunday after Sunday. (Parenthetically I might say this that it would be good to have a few more basses and tenors in the choir just to protect ourselves for the possibility of ever having to hear Mr. Lowry give a solo.) It might appear to the visitor that we do not need a larger staff, but only those of us who work here day in and day out know what could be done if we had more man-power. And certainly we do not need any more organizations, at least we don't if you agree with me that one of the tasks of the church is to keep people home....not to be bringing them out to the church evening after evening for this meeting and that meeting....breaking up families....and to have only those organizations that are essential to the welfare of the church and necessary for the interior lives of the people.

### OUR MOST URGENT NEED

Perhaps you wonder then, what could this Park Avenue Methodist Church possibly need. My experience here as your pastor tells me this that if this church is to continue to grow, then it simply needs more committed members. Let me tell you in a few words what I mean by a committed member. A committed member is a person who has been baptized in some branch of the Christian Church, not necessarily in the Methodist Church, or even in the Protestant Church. He is a person who has been baptized in some branch of the Christian Church, with water and in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, he is a person who has been admitted into membership of some particular branch of the Christian Church. If you will, he has been confirmed, and at that time and in that service he assumed some solemn vows and took upon himself responsibilities

which are part of membership in the Christian Church. For instance, in the Methodist Church, when a person joins he accepts the obligations involved in the following declaration: "Will you be loyal to this Methodist Church and uphold it by yours prayers, presence, gifts and service". Finally, he attends the services of the church regularly, that is, as regularly as it is humanly possible for him to do so. He contributes regularly and generously to the support of the church and participates when called upon in the life and activity of the church. And so you begin to see that by a committed member, I mean a person who cares about the church, comes to church, counts on the church, and expects the church to count on him.

#### WHY DO WE NEED MORE COMMITTED MEMBERS

Some of you have logical minds and the question that may be forming in your thinking at this point is why does this Park Avenue Methodist Church need more committed members? I shall attempt to tell you why. There are two reasons, both of them very practical reasons. In the first place, we need more committed members to take the place of the ones that we lose each year. In the natural course of events each year, some die. Some are dissatisfied and move away to another church where they are ministered to in a way that they prefer. The number of these, I'm happy to say, is relatively few. But the greatest number we lose simply because they move away. This is the age of mobility. Permanence of residence is very rare. Our church is located in one of the most transient sections of New York City, a city which is one of the most transient cities in the world. Let me share with you some of the frustrations we face in the church because of this. Our secretary, back in the month of June, ordered about fifteen new names plates for those who had moved during May and June. Those fifteen new plates for the addressograph arrived around the 20th of June. By the 1st of July, we had to order twenty more plates for those who had moved in late June. Keeping track of the flock is a difficult job. People move within the city at a rapid rate. I looked back over the names of those who were your church leaders two or three years ago. We see the names of men like Mr. Black, Mr. Robinson, Mr. Jansa, Mr. Williams, Mr. Rich Robinson, Dr. Lucas, Mr. Rhymes - just to name a few. None of these men are now in the city. Our choir faces this; last last summer we lost seven men from the ranks of the choir. Dr. Sockman once made this observation that 85% of his congregation turned over every seven years. And this was why he was able to stay on at Christ Church for forty-four years. The people didn't get too tired of him. Later this month I shall be completing my 7th year as minister of this church, and I would venture to say that in the congregation this morning there might be only fifteen to twenty persons who were here in the church in November of 1956. Perhaps this will help you to see the problems that our city churches are facing.

I said there were two reasons why we need more committed members. First - to take the place of the ones we lose. The second reason is one that I am anxious for you to understand and appreciate. In this church, as in most city churches, we minister to many persons who are not members of this church and who will probably never become members. This is the way it should be.

The ministry of this church is constantly reaching out to all sorts of people in every conceivable kind of trouble. People come here from all parts of the city and from all parts of the country and

we minister to these persons as well as we can, unconcerned as to whether the person is a member of this church fellowship or not. I would venture to say that 50% of the pastoral work of the ministry of this church is related to those who are not members of this church. Let me give you a few examples which timewise fall within the past ten days. Last Sunday evening, word came to me of the tragic death by accidental electrocution of the mother of one of our own members. We have attempted to minister to the family. The funeral service was Wednesday afternoon. Thursday afternoon of this week, for two hours, I counselled with a young couple contemplating marriage. He has been married before. Two previous times. He is 32, a member of AA. The girl is 19. We are involved. Neither the young couple, nor the parents of the girl, have any association with our church. This is the second session in ten days we have had with the couple. A letter came to my desk this past week from a woman in Pocahontas, Iowa. The woman is partially blind, in her late forties. She has been to NYC for major surgery on her eyes. Methodist. She attended services here in 1961. Let me read the letter. The ministry of this church is involved. We shall attempt to help her in any way we can when she is here.

This is the kind of ministry that we are attempting to carry on; the kind we should carry on. But the thing I want you to consider is this: this kind of ministry has to be supported by committed members. We can minister to the transient, the lonely, the troubled, the sick, the people who look to the church for help around the difficult corners of life - but the transient cannot maintain the ministry of the church. Rather it depends on the committed corps to supply not only the money (and this in my thinking is not the most important thing), but the life. It is the life and the spirit of those who come here Sunday after Sunday, year in and year out, that makes a person who comes here occasionally say, "It's a friendly church. It's a concerned church. It's a place where I can feel the spirit of God moving and share in the overtones of warm, Christian fellowship." This ministry which over the years has helped many a person around a difficult corner of life can only be carried on, maintained by those who care deeply, love greatly the importance of this ministry and who are willing to become involved in it. Unfortunately, you never hear about the wonderful things that the church, this church, has meant to so many as they have gone through an experience of one kind or another in this city. These are things that perhaps only the minister ever hears. But they are things that you, as a people of God, in this place have supplied to them. *MADE POSSIBLE*

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You may wonder then what you, as an individual, can do about all of this. If you're here only temporarily - today, or a week or two - there isn't a great deal you can do. You can't perhaps do as much as you would like to do.

If you are a member of this church, and perhaps consider yourself a committed member, then ask yourself how committed am I? You may have belonged to this church for a long time. You love this church. It's your church. There have been times when you have desperately needed the church; not often, but there have been times. You may need to ask yourself: is my church needing me?

But on the other hand, if you are settled here in New York City and if you expect to be here for some time (six months at least) and if you come to this church and count on this church and consider this church to be your church home, then perhaps you ought to seriously consider various ways of strengthening your association with this Church. You may want to bring your letter of membership to this church. We would welcome this. You may want to participate in its financial program. There are exceptions to this, but by and large this, I feel, is the thing to do. I don't know if there are any persons present this hour who are in this situation, but if there are I do hope you will think about these things and take them in good faith.

Some of you are new comers to this city. Our city churches are up against some extremely difficult problems. Over 300 churches in New York City in the past fifteen years have closed their doors, gone out of business, forced to abandon the fight. For many churches that have managed to hold on, it continues to be a struggle for survival. We minister in our city churches to a parade of people. And it has been said by Dr. Sockman, "As the city goes, so goes America". We might preface his observation with this thought, "As the church in the city goes, so goes the city".

IN CLOSING It is good for us to take stock our ourselves from time to time and ask ourselves just where do we stand on some of these important matters of life. Do we stand over there with the materialists, the secularists...with those who think that money is God.....with those who think that this is all there is, and that there isn't any more.....with those who declare that there are no permanent and eternal values on which to build....with those who feel that expediency is the way, the truth and the life? Do we stand over there with those who say that what's yours is mind if I can get it and hang on to it.....with those who say that life has no ultimate meaning?

Of do we stand with those who believe in a God that has revealed himself to us in the order and splendor of the universe, in science, in philosophy, and history.....do we believe in a God who has revealed himself to us in a particular person at one point in history....and who in that person revealed his own personality, the ideals of human behavior? Can we accept the total outlook of the Christian Church? Do we look at life from that point of view and make our judgments in that frame of reference. If this is where you stand, then friend, I think the normal and natural thing is to do all you can to strengthen your association with that institution that in this hour is struggling for its survival....in this city.....to resign from the party of indecision, from indifference, from non-involvement. The church depends on its people. The light of it will shine only as far and as brightly as the committment of its individual members. The future of the Christian Church rests not with the clergy, but with the laymen - with laymen whose sense of commitment to the cuase of Christ is as real and as complete as though they themselves had been ordained priest or pastor.

I am very fond of the following illustration. 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 life 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, or so taken up with other matters that they do not have the time or the courage to tell the others. What will you do then?"

It is reported that the voice of our Lord answered quietly and confidently: "I haven't made any other plans. I am counting on them".

LET US PRAY:

God Our Father, thou who hast placed upon us the responsibility for carrying forward thy mission and ministry in this place, in this church and community, make us faithful to the tasks that now confront us that we may not disappoint Thee. We are thankful for this church which over 126 years has continued the ministry of Jesus Christ. May those who worship here never be complacent. May the doors of this church never close. May its heart and mind always be open to those who need help and guidance, comfort and challenge. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen