The Evangelistic Challenge For New America

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Church membership in the United States of America has reached an all time high. The statisticians tell us that approximately 60% of the people of America are now affiliated with some church. This percentage has been gradually climbing since World War II.

Crime and juvenile delinquency have also been on the increase. It is reported that crime is growing four times as fast as our population. It is a matter of great concern on the part of many church leaders that we are not effectively challenging and reaching the youth of America. This should cause us to re-examine our program and re-evaluate our methods.

The basic work of the church is with people and has to do with reaching and keeping persons for Christ. Between 1945 and 1955 there were 37,000,000 babies born in America. It is estimated that 45,000,000 more will be born between 1955 and 1965. In 1965 approximately half of the population of the United States will be under 22 years of age. This population ratio will mean literally a NEW AMERICA.

During the next 20 years there will be a 38.5 increase in population in the United States or a total increase of 63,000,000 persons. The largest increase will be in California and Florida, but there will be an increase in every state in the Union. In recent years several churches as a denomination have not been keeping up with the population increase. Any church that has not had a 10% increase in membership during the last 5 years is losing instead of gaining in proportion to the population. Today there are about 70,000,000 unchurched persons in the United States. With the 63,000,000 net gain in population in the next 20 years, America's greatest challenge is, and will continue to be, the reaching of these 133,000,000 persons for Christ. This offers the church the greatest challenge it has ever had.

We are living in the most dynamic and creative period in our history. Science daily produces something new. Every day the living habits of people are changing. We have more people than ever before and the people have more money to spend than ever before. The work day has been shortened and will, no doubt, be shortened considerably more in the future. Before long we shall probably have a 32 hour work week with a guaranteed annual wage.
If somehow the church can captivate the attention, interest and concern of the people, the opportunities will be unlimited, because the people will have more time to work for Christ and the church, and more money to contribute to the spreading of the Gospel. If the Church of today is to meet the evangelistic challenge for today and for tomorrow several things are important.

I

In the first place, the Church must examine itself concerning its own spiritual vitality. No doubt one of its great needs is to go deeper with God. Unless there is a deepening of the spiritual life of the church it is not likely that it shall have the spiritual vitality necessary to meet the challenge of the hour.

One sign of hope in this connection is found in the Prayer Life Movement that has been rising, spreading and permeating the life of the church in many areas. How such a movement got started no one knows. It seems to have sprung up from the "grass roots" of the church. In recent years many people have come to feel the desperate need of a more vital prayer life and, as a result of the consciousness of need, prayer groups or prayer cells have been voluntarily formed in many places. Shortly after the movement became evident, The General Board of Evangelism of the Methodist Church, ever sensitive to the currents in the church, designated a member of the staff of the board as Counselor for the Prayer Life Movement. Prayer vigils have been held on a national scale and on a church-wide scale. The year 1957 has been designated for a World-wide Prayer Movement. It is possible that this movement may so spiritually vitalize the church that she may rise up to meet the challenge of the hour.

II

A second thing that is important if the church is to meet the challenge for today is a re-evaluation of our concept of stewardship. Only a small percentage of the church members in America have any conception of what it means to be "a good steward of the manifold grace of God". The per capita giving of the membership of the 10 major protestant churches in America ranges from $75.54 per member down to $34.77 per member. With the average national income approaching $5,000 per family, it is easy to see that contributions to the work of our churches represent a mere pittance compared with the stewardship teachings of the Holy Scriptures. To lift this level of giving to that which is taught in the word of God is one of the most difficult tasks confronting the church. If it could be done, however, the church could move forward in an evangelistic and missionary program that would make a tremendous impact upon the world.
A third important consideration before the Church is that of building new churches and regrouping of some existing churches. Scientific studies have revealed that the major contributing factor to the growth of a local church is the continuous increase of the number of classes in the Church School, which is in reality an increase of the units of operation. This same effect is no doubt realized also in increasing the number of churches. The more units of operation we have the more likely we are to grow.

One major denomination in America has set a goal of 30,000 new churches to be organized in the next 10 years. This will almost double the number of churches for the denomination. This is a phase of vital evangelism and will certainly make its contribution toward reaching a new America for Christ. With the increase in population every denomination will need to increase the units of operation.

Visitation evangelism is, we believe, the most effective way of establishing a new church. If one strong, well established church will use its own resources to establish a new one, it can be done effectively and quickly in any area where a new church is needed. Last March we saw visitation evangelistic teams from our church go into a new area of the city and enlist 100 charter members within a week's time. Worship services were started the next Sunday and a pastor secured within three weeks. Members of the new church were able to assume their operating expenses, including their pastor's salary, from the beginning. We believe this method should be used continuously in the growing suburbs of our various cities as the method of securing charter members for the establishment of a new church.

The fourth important consideration for meeting the evangelistic challenge for today is a well-rounded, balanced and effective program of evangelism in the local church. We face entirely different conditions to those of 50 years ago. Once mass evangelism was the primary method of winning people for Christ and the church. That was effective so long as the unchurched people attended the mass revival services. All of us know, however, that today it is practically impossible to get very many unchurched people into mass evangelistic services regardless of how much publicity we give to them. Even the much publicized Billy Graham campaigns reach comparatively few who are not members of any church. We would not in any sense wish to disparage mass evangelism, but would point out that it is not the only method promising abiding results in today's church life.
This being true every local church should plan and promote a well-rounded, balanced and effective program of evangelism if we are to reach New America for Christ. This program should include not just one or two methods of evangelism, but all methods that offer a substantial degree of effectiveness in winning people.

We realize that right down on the local level, where the people live and can be contacted, is the place at which the vital evangelistic work is done. It then becomes the serious and major responsibility of the local church to reach the people in the community of its constituency. No local church should depend upon a national movement for evangelism, but should plan a vital program of reaching those for whom the particular church is responsible.

Several things should be included in this well-rounded, balanced and effective program of evangelism for the local church.

1. An effective commission on membership and evangelism, meeting at least monthly and assuming responsibility for the overall evangelistic program of the church, is vitally essential. The commission should be organized with five or six sub-committees and each committee assuming responsibility for various phases of the work, including prayer and devotions, finding prospects, visitation evangelism, church attendance, assimilation of new members and cultivation of inactive members.

2. The Church School should become an evangelistic agency, to the end that each officer and teacher becomes a personal witness and a personal worker for Christ. Teachers must learn to teach for a verdict.

3. A revival campaign in each local church at least once each year is important, particularly for the quickening of the spiritual life of the church members themselves. It is very evident that one of our great fields of evangelism is among our church members. Many of them need to find God. In a revival campaign many of our church members can be led to a re-dedication of their lives and into an experience of the fulness of the Spirit. Every church member needs an experience of Christ that will give him a concern for every unchurched person in the community.

4. Visitation evangelism must be a vital part of a balanced program of evangelism for the church. Since many unchurched people never come to our public services, we must go to them with a personal witness. Weekly or monthly visiting by visitation evangelism teams as a year-round program will produce wonderful results. This can be intensified with a week of visitation evangelism each fall or each spring or both.

Of course, we need to find the prospects if we are to promote a visitation evangelism program. A religious census each year or each two years is important if we are to find the people. Other
available sources for prospects are the church and Church School rolls, checking for other members in families where a part are either members of the church or Church School, registration of attendance at the worship services, Welcome Wagon service, and other community agencies.

5. A vital evangelistic program for the local church must certainly include a mission to youth. There are 19,000,000 young people in America between the ages of 12 and 23 years who have no church affiliation. This number will be increasing with the growing population, unless the church becomes more effective in reaching youth for Christ. The church has no greater responsibility than to the youth of America. Youth can be trained to win youth and it is important to use them more extensively in the evangelistic program of the church.

6. A church attendance crusade each year can be a vital part of a year-round evangelistic program. This gives a wonderful opportunity to cultivate and re-enlist inactive members.

7. A constant cultivation of the devotional life of the members, which will include promotion of family worship is very important. The distribution of THE UPPER ROOM will aid greatly in the establishment of family altars and the cultivation of the devotional life of the people of the local church.

8. A vital, well balanced evangelistic program will also include regular Sunday evening evangelistic services, and regular preaching for a verdict on the part of the pastor at all the weekly worship services. This should include a clear invitation for people to seek Christ and accept Him as their personal Savior.

CONCLUSION

The Ford Motor Company spent $500,000,000 in 1956 for expansion. Mr. Henry Ford II in announcing this program said "Just to keep from losing ground we've got to move ahead".

If the church is to keep from losing ground, we must move ahead with a vital evangelistic program. It is not enough to hold the lines. Battles are never won that way. With our increase in population in America, the challenge for the church becomes greater every day. The church must not fail a new America. We must deepen our own spiritual life; we must dedicate our money to God; we must build new churches for New America; we must have more preachers and missionaries to carry the Gospel; we must intensify our evangelistic and educational program to win the churched and also the unchurched for Jesus Christ. It is a tremendous task that calls for a deep dedication on the part of God's people.