

THE COUNTRY CHURCH

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

THERE has just been published by the Macmillan Company a book on "The Country Church" by Charles Otis Gill and Gifford Pinchot. The book is not a general consideration of general problems of the country church, but deals with the decline of its influence and the remedy. It embodies the specific results of a three-year study of the actual facts in Windsor County, Vermont, and Tompkins County, New York, by Mr. Gill, during which the church affiliations and the church-going habits of every individual old enough to go to church were ascertained for a population of more than fifty thousand people in the two counties; and this work was done not for a single year, but for two years twenty years apart.

Mr. Gill's qualifications for the work include fifteen years of actual service as a country minister, which means fifteen years of practical contact with many of the problems which are discussed in the book. One of the most remarkable changes in a rural community of which I have knowledge followed the establishment of a church by Mr. Gill in a little town in Vermont in which there had been no church for the preceding twenty years. After the church was established "the change which followed was swift, striking, thorough, and enduring. The public property of the town, once a source of graft and demoralization, became a public asset. The value of real estate increased beyond all proportion to the general rise of land values elsewhere. In the decade and a half which has elapsed since the church began its work boys and girls of a new type have been

brought up. The reputation of the village has been changed from bad to good, the public order has greatly improved, and the growth of the place as a summer resort has begun. It is fair to say that the establishment of the church under Mr. Gill began a new era in the history of the town." What Mr. Metzger has done with his church in a larger Vermont town teaches the same lesson. Even men who are not professedly religious must, if they are frank, admit that no community permanently prospers, either morally or materially, unless the church is a real and vital element in its community life. This book is based, not on amateur conclusions, but on professional experience as well as upon careful and extensive figures. It deals with the Protestant churches only. The investigation which produced it sprang from the work of the Country Life Commission, of which Gifford Pinchot was a member. It is an effort to answer the disputed question, "What is the condition of the country church?" by examining that condition in the light of exact figures of membership, expenditures, and attendance at two periods twenty years apart.

Membership, which has largely been relied upon as the test of prosperity in studies of churches hitherto made, is here shown not to be a reliable criterion, for the reason that many churches in these two counties were found to have increased their membership while declining in expenditures, in attendance, and in general church work. The membership statistics for these two counties go to prove that the churches are doing well,

whereas the exact opposite is the fact. Expenditures also fail to furnish a sound basis of judgment unless they are compared, not on the basis of the number of dollars contributed and spent, but on the basis of the purchasing power of those dollars in the two periods.

Church attendance is the best basis of judgment, for "men and women go to church because it is their duty or because they want to. In either case it is the hold of the church and what the church stands for which supplies the motive power."

Although surveys of the country church have been made before, as, for example, the useful and extensive work done by Warren H. Wilson under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church, the results given in the present book are more definite and more detailed, as well as more thorough, than any which have been made public until now.

The investigation of Windsor County was made first. The results it gave were confirmed by the results reached in Tompkins County. The book begins, therefore, with a brief summary of the conclusions to be drawn from the figures secured and compiled for the two counties together :

Church membership in Windsor County increased in the twenty years 4 per cent, and in Tompkins County 2 per cent. These figures on their face point to hopeful conclusion concerning the churches, which further study shows to be unwarranted. One of the important results of the investigation was to show the wholly misleading character of statistics of membership as a measure of the vitality of the churches in Windsor and Tompkins Counties.

In the twenty-year period in Windsor County, out of 49 churches for which the facts were learned as to both attendance and membership, it was found that in no less than 37 the attendance had declined in proportion to membership, while in Tompkins County out of a total of 36 churches all but two were similarly affected, so that in the two counties together the attendance declined in proportion to membership in 71 churches out of 85.

When expressed in dollars, the expenditures of the churches in Windsor County increased 23 per cent, and in Tompkins County 7 per cent, in the twenty years. But when measured in purchasing power, or in their ability to produce results, church expenditures in Windsor County declined 2 per cent, and in Tompkins County 9 per cent, in the twenty years. This decline is still more significant when it is contrasted with the rapidly increasing scale of expenditures in nearly all departments of human life, and with the further fact that in the two counties there is a general feeling of good will toward the churches, which results in money contributions

for their support by those who are identified with them in no other way.

In Windsor County 64 per cent and in Tompkins County 72 per cent of the ministers were receiving less real pay in the second period than were their predecessors in the first period.

In Windsor County 34 out of 53 ministers, and in Tompkins County 21 out of 29 ministers, received in purchasing power smaller salaries than those of twenty years before.

In Windsor County 25 per cent [of the ministers], and in Tompkins County 33 per cent, are either foreign born or sons of foreign born, yet in both of these counties the Protestant population is of nearly pure American stock.

Records of church attendance were found to be insufficient to furnish a safe basis of comparison between 1888 and 1908. A new method had to be devised by Mr. Gill, who succeeded in getting from the testimony of witnesses who knew the churches in both years a set of tables of attendance so accurate and conservative that its reliability was fully confirmed by all the records of counted congregations which could be found :

Church attendance in Windsor County fell off in twenty years nearly 31 per cent, and in Tompkins County 33 per cent. Making allowances for the decline in Protestant population, the loss in Windsor County was more than 29 per cent, and in Tompkins County 19 per cent.

But the situation is more serious than even those facts would lead us to suppose. The investigation shows that the condition of the churches in the strictly rural districts is very much worse than in the large villages, although there is reason to fear that in a decade or two the condition of the churches in these larger communities will also become acute.

In the strictly rural districts of Tompkins County there is a loss of 40 per cent in attendance in 20 years, while

In the strictly rural districts in Windsor County there is a loss in church attendance of no less than 53 per cent.

The great decline in church attendance in the open country is the most alarming fact developed by the investigation. In a very large part of the churches of both counties the congregations have been decreasing so rapidly and are now so small as to make the conditions and prospects most disheartening to the church-going people.

The remedies suggested are simple and direct. Naturally and rightly, the first is the improvement of country life generally. As is well said in the book :

The country church cannot hope for prosperity apart from the improvement of country life. Whatever tends to produce a lower standard of

living in the country necessarily and immediately affects the country church. If there were no other and weightier reasons, as a mere matter of self-preservation the church could not afford to hold itself aloof from the struggle to secure the conditions of successful life upon the land. It cannot hold itself free from responsibility for the continuance of bad economic conditions and expect to thrive in the midst of them.

Better farming must sustain a better religious life, just as it does a better social life. It is striking, but not unexpected, to find that in Tompkins County, half of which has good soil and half poor, the more prosperous churches are found on the better soils.

The second remedy recommended is the adoption of a programme of social service for the churches—not the abandonment of the spiritual efforts in which they are now engaged, but the addition thereto of a definite effort to help the community. In my own judgment, this remedy is vital. We can, I believe, restore the church to its old influence; but never by confining its activities chiefly to the region of dogmatic theology. The church must play a helpful, integral part in the human relations of the community. "Be ye doers of the word," and not mere preachers and hearers; and the doing must be in the spirit set forth in the last few verses of the first chapter and the opening verses of the second chapter of the epistle of James. We must work with thorough acceptance of the principles laid down by Dean Shailer Mathews; it is the actual application of these principles that has enabled the Rev. Charles Stelzle to turn the dry corpse of a church into a living, focal center for applied Christianity, that enabled Dr. Rainsford and his successors to make St. George's Church one of the most powerful influences for good in New York City. This does not mean that social life should be divorced from the religious life; Dr. Josiah Strong has pointed out that to neglect the spiritual is an even greater blunder than to neglect the physical factor in life. It does mean that the churches of the country districts must throw themselves into the current of neighborhood life precisely in the spirit described by Charles Hatch Sears in his book "The Redemption of the City," when recounting the part played by the best city churches among the forces that tell for social regeneration.

The church in the country needs a new programme. With the whole world turning to combined or co-operative action as the basis of efficiency, the programme of the country

churches continues to deal wholly with individuals, and hence remains defective and one-sided.

Social service is the master Christian impulse of our time. The country church needs social service to vitalize it as much as the social service of the country needs the help of the church. Although less attention has been given to it, social service is as important for the health of the community in the country as in the city, while results in the country are far more easily accomplished. Once the duty of social service is recognized by the country church, and the responsibility for it frankly accepted, there will be no insuperable difficulties in the way.

Church co-operation, which is the third remedy, is feasible along the line of work for the general welfare, whereas church union on doctrinal lines is often difficult or impossible. (A point made on a larger scale, again and again, by Silas McBee.)

In the villages of Windsor and Tompkins Counties the more numerous the churches the greater the loss in attendance in the last twenty years.

There is but one solution for the problem of overchurching which seems to offer reasonable hope in the two counties concerned. This lies along the line, not of doctrinal union, but of common effort in the cause of the common welfare. Where people work together for a better community, they are the more likely to work together for a better church. Divisions in the churches may often be bridged over by setting the members of hostile groups working together for the common good.

The fourth remedy is a country ministry in touch with the vital interests of the country people, not only better trained as to the interests of their parishioners in the country, but also in touch with affairs in the larger world, and especially better paid. You cannot expect good men in the ministry until the ministry offers a reasonable living for the minister and his family.

The country ministry in these two counties is weak because it has little to do with the vital needs of the people. As a rule it is out of touch with the essential problems which control the welfare not only of country life, but of the church itself. The essential fact is that the minister is often aloof from the real concerns of the people. Too often he has no intelligent appreciation of whole fields of human interests that are rightly of prime importance to his parishioners. The country minister needs special training for work in the country.

Furthermore, as we have seen, the salary of the average minister in Windsor and Tompkins Counties is not a living wage. Such underpayment necessarily keeps him out of touch with the progress of his profession, by depriving him of books and journals; it debars him from the knowledge and uplift which conventions

supply, and it creates a condition of restlessness which not only kills his own effectiveness in his work, but rightly prevents him from advising the vigorous and ambitious young men of his acquaintance to enter the ministry. The country ministry will not be better until it is better paid.

One of the urgent needs of the country minister in the area covered by this investigation is contact with a world larger than his parish.

The country minister too often feels lost in a backwater of the main stream of progress, and sees himself as engaged in a solitary struggle with small, discouraging, and unessential problems, while as a matter of fact his place upon the stage of civilization is very near the center, and no one has a better right than he to all the enthusiasm of those who are employed in the most vital of tasks.

The fifth remedy is county-wide and then State-wide organization among the churches for the promotion of the general social welfare. How effective this recommendation is is well shown by the fact that it has already been applied, as a result of the investigation, in Windsor County, Vermont, in the so-called Hartford Forward Movement, and has since spread from the county to the State, and into Massachusetts also.

The country churches of Windsor and Tompkins Counties are each too small as units of

organization to be able to carry on the work of social service with efficiency. A larger and more powerful unit, corresponding to the combinations of modern business, is necessary before the churches can take their reasonable part in the work for the general welfare. Just what form such an organization should take may be open to discussion. The form it has taken in Vermont is described on pages 53-59.

Whatever form is accepted should rest on the principle that the needs of the community should determine the work of the church.

The book is published under authority of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. This body, in the work of which some thirty Protestant denominations join, has not only adopted the book but has taken over the work of putting its recommendations into practice. The Social Service Commission of the Federal Council has put Mr. Gill himself in charge of this work, under the general oversight of a committee with Mr. Pinchot as Chairman. The work will begin as soon as Mr. Gill has returned from a study of the co-operative methods of production, marketing, and rural credit as a member of the Commission which recently sailed—methods which have done so much to lift the level of country life in Italy, Denmark, Ireland, and elsewhere.