

Boundary Maintenance in Church Matters For the Sparsely Populated Plains

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Summary of Past Suggestions

SOME of you are acquainted with some of my ideas concerning the Church for the sparsely populated Plains. I have tried to say the following:¹

(1) The sparsely populated areas of the Nation, and the Great Plains in particular, require an adaptation of the institutional pattern of the Church organization to the facts of sparsity of population and the fluctuations in precipitation typical of the region.

(2) Specific aspects of such adaptations are, among others, the idea of reserves for funds to be set aside in years of plenty to operate in years of less income. But I know of no takers of this recommendation.

(3) Suspecting there might be few or no takers, I suggested a flexible program inherent in the multi-pastor larger parish idea, one supported by a regional budget. By such flexibility the church service program can be expanded in good and contracted in poor years; but never so completely contracted that it would have to be closed, necessitating heroic efforts to get started again when times are better and when time itself is at a premium. Some of the staff in such a multi-pastor larger parish program could go off to school for further training during the years of contraction.

¹ See for example; Kraenzel, Carl F., "The Church's Stake in the Agriculture and In The Community In The Great Plains," *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XV, No.3 Fall, 1958.

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I have seen no experimentation with this.²

(4) A fourth recommendation had to do with greater mobility of the pastor and the program. Some experimentation has taken place in this respect. There are instances of "flying pastors" for example. Detailed description and study of such practices are limited.³

(5) Another recommendation was church consolidation and federation, even to the point of "writing a common ticket" for church membership regardless of denomination; one that can be cashed with equal acceptability at a Methodist or a Lutheran or perhaps in a Baptist church in a more densely populated area if and when the member moves to a more densely settled area. The recommendation of such a common ticket (involving baptism and other ceremonial functions) has been viewed with raised eye-brow if not with horror; how could a man get into a church without a legitimate "visa" with the proper denominational stamp on it, to say nothing of having an all purpose visa from a church in the Plains? Church federation or consolidation for reasons of underpopulation, to my knowledge, has hardly occurred during this prosperous period of World War II and following; in fact not many years ago I had the privilege of attending a regional

² However the idea is fermenting. See Whitley, Oliver Read, *The Rural Church: Its Response to the Changing Society. The Iliff Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, Fall, 1961. especially pp. 10-12.

³ See Samson, A'Delbert, "The Small Plane on the Great Plains," *Montana State College Farmer*, Vol. 9, No. 4, June, 1956, pp. 18; North, Stanley U., "The Church Comes Alive in Powder River County," *Advance*, Nov. 1, 1954. pp. 8-10.

Church Conference for Lutherans, held in one of the few luxurious church quarters I have ever been in—a Methodist Church of all things, in Garden City, Kansas,⁴ and to climax it all, here in Bozeman, Montana I find that there was organized a new Congregational church organization only recently.⁵ So I see not a positive forward step in the matter of properly churching the sparsely populated areas during this period of relative prosperity.

(6) Finally, I have recommended a church service and a pastors training program oriented to the facts of semi-aridity and sparsity of population. Perhaps even a seminary designed to train ministers for just this kind of service might not be out of order. In this connection I have recommended that the "high" church get rid of its snob-like affectations and cater to people who otherwise will join sectarian groups. Only recently was I reading again how the Methodists of Canada failed to fit themselves to the conditions of the Plains. Methodism, therefore, lost out to the Salvation Army which, for a time, was a thriving religious organization. Then it too took on snob-appeal status, and lost membership.⁶ I have the impression that the snob-appeal religious groups will be snubbed in the future in the sparsely populated areas—they will lose out to the sectarian groups if they don't get off their high horse.

These are some of the recommendations I have made about churching the sparsely populated Plains region. Whatever I have said I have tried to cast in terms of basic institutional adaptations for the region with the church only one facet of such institutional services for

communities that are generally on the small side in the Plains region.

Meaning of Boundary Maintenance

On this occasion I would like to take another tack, and emphasize a different aspect. This has to do with "boundary maintenance." This is a basic concept employed by sociologists.⁷ By this is meant that social activity and those particular techniques that are employed to maintain the identity of a group.

Clark Wissler, an anthropologist who studied the American Indian, explicitly formulated the culture area and culture age concepts, and spoke of culture as growing from the center and spreading outward. It was like dropping a pebble into the middle of a pool of water. The little waves would move outwards from the center, until they met counter waves coming from another center. Wissler's theory was that a study of culture change, growth and diffusion would show that:

- (1) The center had the old culture traits at the bottom of the hierarchy and the new ones at the top.
- (2) The center was the place of innovation and reception of ideas from the outside; and after being assimilated these new ways would radiate out from the center.
- (3) At the periphery one found, the older traits, not the new ones — the older ones which were at the bottom of the hierarchy. Eventually the new traits would radiate from the center of the periphery.
- (4) Some striking differences between two adjacent cultures would be found at the periphery where the two met. This is where many basic traits of the two cultures would be least likely to merge; such basic merging would take place at the respective cen-

⁴ Sponsored by the Lutheran Town and Church Council in the Fall of 1958.

⁵ In the summer and fall of 1961.

⁶ See the abridged and adapted description of a portion of S. D. Clark's "Church and Sect in Canada", Toronto University Press, 1948, as quoted in Broom and Selznick, *Sociology*, Row and Peterson, 1958, pp. 242-249.

⁷ For a description of this, including its place in Social Theory by various writers, see Loomis, Charles P., and Zona, K., *Modern Social Theories*, Van Nostrand, 1961, p. 16 and in the reviews of the several theorists whose writings are here analyzed.

ters and would then radiate outward. However some mixing at the periphery must be expected.

Whatever the factual situation concerning the theory and the evidence to support it,⁸ the point is that the two adjacent cultures continued only as two separate cultures as long as they maintained their identities — and this they did by means of boundary maintenance efforts. There are many techniques to accomplish this boundary maintenance. Among them is the idea of “we group” as contrasted with “out-group” feelings. In boundary maintenance these are very sharp and strong. The enhancement of the spirit of ethnocentrism is another way of accomplishing this identity of the groups. Rules of endogamy or exogamy are very significant in the perpetuation of boundaries. The role of the unique or peculiar in matters of dress, food habits, ideas and behavior of all kinds frequently has the function of boundary maintenance, as have initiation ceremonies, special training, limitation of the size of the group, and ceremonial activities of all kinds. These are only some specific examples of the techniques used to accomplish this.

It is worth mentioning a few examples of cultural differences living side by side due to boundary maintenance. One is the Jews who have retained their cultural identity for many hundreds of years, even while not having a country of their own and while living chiefly in the urban centers of their host countries — the urban centers where cultural change, innovation and

diffusion tend to be at a maximum.⁹ Jews are known for having developed biculturality or co-existence to a maximum. Finally, the ultimate of this boundary maintenance activity was that a Nation — Israel — was created.

Another example is the Mormon religion and way of life as distinct from that of gentiles. This sectarian group has its own community identity and community programs, a social security program practically on a par with that of our Federal Social Security program, and a foreign mission program of some considerable consequence.¹⁰

Still another example of cultural identity achieved by means of boundary maintenance is the Hutterite communities here in Montana. Basically they do not differ from the Mennonites, the Amish¹¹ and certain other religious communities. Boundary maintenance is at the very core of the survival of these communities.

From what has been said it is clear that religion, the Church, denominationalism, and the Church leadership are not unaware of the significance of boundary maintenance functions. And it is certain that one of the reasons, perhaps the major reason, that the recommendations that I have made for churching the sparsely populated Plains Region have not been successful is that every one has violated the boundary maintenance spirit that has prevailed in

⁸ Clark Wissler developed these concepts in connection with his studies of *The American Indian* (1917), *Man and Culture* (1923) and *The Relation of Nature to Man in Aboriginal America* (1926). Other anthropologists, including A. L. Kroeber, assign to Wissler the first use and application of these concepts. However, there are many who are critical of these concepts. See Beals and Hoijer, *An Introduction to Anthropology*, Macmillan, 2nd Ed. 1959, pp. 670-674.

⁹ See Schermerborn, R. H., *These Our People*, Heath and Co., 1949, Chaps. 16 and 17, dealing with the Jewish community and anti-Semitism. See also Loomis, et al, *Rural Social Systems and Adult Education*, Michigan State Press, 1953, pp. 199-206 concerning the Jewish Agricultural Society and its purposes.

¹⁰ Anderson, Nels, *Desert Saints*, University of Chicago Press, 1942, especially chaps. 1, 4 to 11 and 14. Also O'Dea, Thomas F., *The Mormons*, University of Chicago Press, 1957, Chaps. 6, 7, 8 and 9.

¹¹ See Loomis, Charles P. and Zona K., *Modern Social Theories*, Van Nostrand, 1961, pp. 8-17. See also “The Old Order Amish of Pennsylvania,” by John Gillin in O'Brien, Shrag and Martin, *Readings in General Sociology*, Houghton Mifflin, 1957, No. 29.

denominationalism. It will be difficult to overcome these boundary maintenance values that the Church has always had or to channel this enthusiasm and effort into more constructive activity for wrestling with the environmental conditions that prevail in the Plains. And it is this that I wish to address myself to for the remainder of this paper.

Boundary Maintenance and the Community

A major trend in Western Civilization has been constant enlarging of the world of interaction for people.¹² The local community has become ever larger. Once limited by the team haul, now the ends or the boundaries of the community are almost limitless. People even speak of the National and the International community. To a sociologist, this sounds absurd unless this National and International community is merely a single-interest association, since community means exactly what it says — a community of several interests that hold people together in a somewhat personal way and identified with a specific locality.

But it is true that communities are becoming larger; some are becoming very large in geographic area. Especially is this so in the sparsely populated Plains Region. This is true for many services—trade, medical care, school, and specialty services of all kinds. The only analysis that would appear to make sense midst the complex pattern of social interaction is something like this:

(1) There are small service centers, near to rural people, that once may have been reasonably self-sufficient

and complete service centers. Today they are specialty centers in the sense of being conveniently located centers for a few services only and often these are used only when urgently necessary. Many therefore have a tenuous existence.

(2) There are larger service centers, where people buy specialty services. From the standpoint of the people living there or nearby, these may be complete service centers or nearly so. But from the viewpoint of the people at remote distances they again are specialty centers, and the farmer or rancher near the small center, and the few residents of these small centers may patronize several of these larger centers. Therefore there is also something insecure and tenuous about these larger centers.

(3) But there have been recent influences that make of these larger centers, just previously mentioned, only partial centers too. Services from still larger centers have reached out to supply these relatively large centers, or the still larger centers have drawn the populous to themselves for long distances, at least periodically. The result has been that even the relatively larger centers have lost many services. This has come about for many reasons — the modern high speed transportation, the looking for "greener pastures" and bargains, the attraction of the economies offered by the largest shopping centers, and for other reasons. One of these other reasons is the enthusiasm that American's have for things that are faster and larger.¹³

Whatever advantages there may be in patronizing these larger centers pe-

¹² Many writers have described the several trends involved in this. Among them are Ferdinand Tonnies, Emile Durkheim, Robert Redfield, Max Weber, Howard Becker, Robin M. Williams Jr., Karl Mannheim, and Jose Ortega Y. Gassett. Also many detailed community studies by Rural Sociologists have described this trend in its many aspects.

¹³ For example see the *U.S. News and World Report* for Sept. 19, 1961, which has an article on Strip Cities and their growth. The May 7, 1962 issue of this same publication has an article entitled, "Cities Crowding—Countryside Losing." This reviews tersely some census data and certain special studies applying to the mid-section of the United States, including the Plains States.

riodically or regularly, it would appear that it has so enlarged the area of communication and interaction that it has made the once definite community an indefinite community. What once were community centers that were patronized by people in a spirit of loyalty and allegiance are now in many instances, community centers to which people have little loyalty nor deep allegiance. Therefore things do not get done. For example, people do not vote for school improvement funds in their local area, nor do they vote for such bond issues in the larger area; but they do complain when they do not have the school services at their door-step. Again, by way of example, people do not patronize their local doctor, so lose him; and they are so loosely connected to the doctors at the larger places at distances away that they cannot have the services readily during emergency periods, and certainly not at their beck and call. Illustrations such as these can be multiplied manifold.

The essential point to be made is that in this process of making the world of association and interaction ever larger, we have failed to maintain the boundaries of a community, even a large community. This is not a plea for maintaining a small community. All that needs to be emphasized is that perhaps Americans have discarded all boundary maintenance functions, and it is suggested that to have group life at all, boundary maintenance is necessary—even in a democracy. It is apparent that “community” is necessary for the socialization or the taming of man, though there may be decided differences of opinions whether all communities shall be of equal size or whether some shall be smaller and less specialized and therefore dependent upon others; and that there shall be intelligent working relations between communities with different specialties and of different size. But above all, there must be a maintenance of the boundaries of these communities, large and small, and in

regard to those functions that require an interdependence. The matter may be illustrated this way. Good health, is in large measure, the result of good public health services; and good public health has something compulsory about it. To have an absence of typhoid, it is necessary to locate “Typhoid Mary” in order to isolate her, and then to allow no new outbreak of the disease. This is true of many other physical illnesses. This is also true of weed control—if the goal is to control weeds in a community, everyone must necessarily do so; otherwise the effort comes to naught. This is also true of dust blowing, smog control, fire control and numerous other physical hazards. It is true of all social problems—to curb social problems it is necessary to curb the slums, unemployment, and certain other forms of social disorganization; not that there is necessarily a causal relationship but situations are problems because they appear in clusters, not in single and simple relationships.

And so it would appear to be the case with people living in large areas of association, without community. To be without community is a social problem, a slum situation, a social disease; and there cannot be communities without boundaries. It would appear then that boundary maintenance techniques and functions need to be implemented with respect to community life—especially in the Great Plains where population is becoming increasingly more sparse; where many small villages and towns are dying; where distances traveled are great, and sometimes fantastic as in some instances of transporting school children; and where businesses are consolidated, vertically and horizontally, so that many services can be purchased only at an occasional center long distances away. Incident to this is the need to get the larger centers to reach out to the smaller places and guarantee some kind of service to the small center, even if it is no more than a telephone and delivery service for certain

services; or the guarantee that the service will not finally also be removed from the larger center.

There is a historical reason for all this. One of the tragic aspects of rural life in America, contrasted with that of Europe, is that the farm and ranch people have never really been part of a community in the true sense, because they have never been part of the community center.¹⁴ Generally the villages and towns, or the cities, have separated themselves from the farm and ranch people by incorporation. By this means they have developed certain services for themselves, but not for the ranch and farm people. Furthermore, main-street has often treated the farmer, when he has come to town, as an "invader". He was expected to drive into the elevator, open his endgate; deliver his grain; and then stand and wait for his income. The rancher was likewise expected to deliver his stock at the yards of the seller and not ask questions. Then the farmer or rancher was expected to spend their money on main-street, without questions asked. In reality then, farmers and ranchers never had a center in which they could participate, and therefore never had a true community through which they could work. This became apparent, for example, when towns and cities put on campaigns to collect money for hospital construction from their own residents and from farmers and ranchers, but did not want the latter on the board. If Americans have used boundary maintenance techniques in this connection, they have used it to split a community rather than to build one—and as the travel distances for farmers and ranchers for services increased, the chance for their participation was in all probability decreased.

The wall between East and West Berlin is only a more dramatic incident

on a World-wide scale not different from the wall that has always separated the American farmer and rancher from his community center. In the Great Plains, where population is generally sparse and where participation is low by virtue of the few residents, this boundary between ranchers and farmers on the one hand, and mainstreeters on the other, has made for especially weak communities — and the need to resolve this problem is especially urgent in this region.

Conclusion

What is the role of the Great Plains Church of the future in this matter of boundary maintenance? It would appear to be a simple one, implicit in the recommendations made at the beginning of this paper. The task of the Church in the sparsely populated Plains would appear to be to federate the now dissident denominationalism, give a universally acceptable visa for membership in any denomination anywhere, and then concentrate on helping build and maintain boundaries for communities in all matters religious and involving all related functions that make for community. Let it be emphasized again that this community for the Plains will necessarily be a larger one than in the past, but one not too large so that the boundaries can continue to be psychologically meaningful. In addition to simple communities, there will probably be more complex ones, but there needs to be a cooperative relationship between the several types of communities. In this respect the multi-pastor larger parish idea, it would appear, would serve as an ideal institutional device to be tested and refined. In this multi-pastor larger parish one might perhaps have a team of pastors consisting of a Methodist, a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian, maybe a Baptist, perchance a Catholic in some instances, and then maybe a pinch of sectarianism. Would that be too much to expect from the Church to serve the cause of

¹⁴ The writings of Sorokin, Zimmerman and Galpin in their Source Book in Rural Sociology describe some of this contrast in settlement in the Old World and in America.

religion for people in the sparsely populated Plains? New boundaries would replace the old. The Church people should not be at all hesitant in carry-

ing out this boundary maintenance function in this new context measured by their past enthusiasm for doing this.

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