

Without My Pulpit

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SOME five hundred sermons ago I began my career as a Congregational minister. Much of my time has been spent in the private recesses of men's lives. Parishioners expected me to be the friend who understood their secret hopes, their unspoken fears, their griefs, their confused motivations. The pastorate brought me into a certain intimacy with the layman as he permitted me to share many of the personal moments that he kept hidden from others.

Yet I felt there was an important part of him my parish work did not touch. I did not know what it was, but in many respects he became more and more a stranger to me. Unless I could get better acquainted with the laymen, I felt my ministry had run its course.

Then I entered his world and lived according to his rules—it was unlike anything I had ever known. Living without my pulpit and associating with the layman in his own setting gave me a new understanding and appreciation of him. What I uncovered was nothing more than the mundane realities of his workaday world, and the importance they seemed to play in his well being. However, this left me holding experiences with deep implications for my future parish ministry as I realized how far removed church life, as I knew it, was from the dynamics of a man's job.

I began my sojourn as a member of the chaplain's staff in a state mental hospital; and later in the same institution I did work in another department that had no connection with my ministerial profession. Although this work made me a non-religious figure in the eyes of my fellow employees, the church was never far from my mind; I viewed

events as both layman and parish minister. This duality made it seem as though I was trying to photograph two objects so far removed from each other that one would have to be out of focus. If I looked closely at the layman in his work situation, his church was a blur; yet focusing on the church made the layman indistinct.

My first lesson in getting to know the laymen came while I worked as a chaplain. Sharing common work experiences with the hospital personnel, professional and non-professional, laborers and technicians, I became aware of the differences existing between a man's involvement in his job and in his church. On his job he expects his activity to satisfy both his financial and psychological needs. This creates an intense involvement on his part. There is hardly a moment when something personal is not at stake. Egos climb aboard events, routine or otherwise, in search of satisfaction; trivialities symbolize the prize—or loss. And it is important, very important, to get the prize.

A church, however, is a voluntary organization and the layman does not invest as much of himself in it as he does in his job. Only now and then are conditions such that he can respond alike to church and work. Perhaps it is this contrast in involvements that prompts remarks about a man's Sunday piety being out of keeping with his week-day behavior—"those hypocrites in the churches." This hypocrisy is not so much a difference in the man as it is in his responses to different situations.

My next lesson began as soon as I moved out of the chaplancy. In retrospect I see this move as a prerequisite, for then, and only then, was I subjected to the same demands as the other employees. Apparently the aura of a "man of God" immunized me from much of

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what had been going on around me for nearly a year. Fellow workers, even those with whom I had associated quite closely, began to treat me differently. The change, subtle but unmistakable, was a response more to my role than to me. This was shown by one person's remark while I was still a chaplain: "I find it difficult to disagree with a minister." In my new position, however, this inhibition ceased.

It was as though workers did not know how to treat a clergyman, but they did know what to do with one of their own kind. I was not a religious figure any longer but a legitimate part of a structure intricately fashioned to use work as the vehicle to satisfy emotional needs. Therefore I was subject to all the pressures, intrigues and manipulations necessary to fulfill this demand. Each member of this structure does what he can to get those around him to give to him his needed responses. It is a serious business, this emotional survival.

Nor are the members of the power structure immune from these demands of human nature. They search for supportive responses like the rest. Being ego involved in their work, their personal ambitions become synonymous with the welfare of the organization, and it becomes essential to have the workers' "cooperation." Manipulation is always wedded to ambition. The power inherent in the working elite is forever present, pressuring workers this way and that to create the right responses.

Through all of this the worker tries not to leave his own needs unattended. While he may say the pay check is his only concern, he fights hard to control his work situation so it can support whatever self image he holds. He cannot exist for long in an unfriendly environment. The paycheck is not unrelated to emotional situations; there are certain things the psyche demands.

The calm of the normal work routine is precariously balanced. The mere

presence of a new face shatters it: an efficiency expert comes, "Will he decide I'm not needed?" or a new worker, "Can he do the job better than I can?" or a different supervisor, "How can he appreciate me, he doesn't know the things I've done in the past?" A rumor carries with it the potential of emotional panic, and a policy change is reason enough to consider quitting one's job.

This work world is a complex of surging stimuli beyond the pale of right and wrong. From it a man's responses bring him both his satisfactions and his dissatisfactions. Because of the uncertainties of just which it will be, insecurity is his constant companion.

As soon as these demands hit me I knew I was out of my familiar element. About all I could do was bounce along like a prairie tumble weed blown from fence row to fence row as the winds changed this way and that. It was several weeks before I began to comprehend the world I was in.

When I did, and began to identify with the workers around me, I felt that these factors I have tried to describe were inherent realities of work situations. They were not removable or subject to radical modifications. A man might quit his job and take another, he may be promoted and have different duties, but still the new would be like the old. The dynamics that turn work into a pursuit for emotional satisfactions are still present. They are permanent factors to be assimilated in the worker's life. Whatever meanings a man finds will come from the experiences that make up his world.

This inescapable nature looms even larger if one considers the relationship between other areas of a man's life and his job. There is perhaps no other place where he has as much at stake as he does in his work. From it he maintains his family, his way of life, his very existence. This awareness can be sobering, for he knows how fragile the tie is that connects him to his work. He does

not have to work many years before he can look at his skills and say, "This is all that I know how to do. There's nothing else for me." And his retirement days seem a long way away.

From the perspective of my new-found lay life, I looked at the churches to see how closely they touched this work world. Churches have participated more or less successfully in many human situations. In times of deep distress and personal crisis they have been man's sanctuary; the rites, sacraments and ceremonies are abiding events for many families; the gathered communities are sources for significant fellowship. However, in my own ministry and churches as I knew them, there is little contact with laymen on the job.

The closest is in areas of social action. As important as this is, it does not reach the emotional structure in which he works. Having done what he can about the migrant workers, stream pollution, the family's role in the changing society, he goes back to his manipulating work situation which has been untouched by his concern for social action.

Even the intimate role of pastor separated me from the layman's work life. In the church he is a volunteer, and this was how I associated with him. In one sense he was not living where I saw him. The chasm was further widened by the fact that my church participation was filled with as much ego involvement as a man has in his business. While I functioned in the church at one level, the layman participated at another; consequently our lives never met.

Like many other clergymen, I made an abortive effort to know the men by joining a service club. It is possible to be well liked and thought of as a "good guy," yet the clergyman is no closer to the men here than in his own church. Service clubs, like churches, are volunteer organizations.

From my on-the-job point of view many of the churches' activities appeared to be more helpful to the institution than to the members. It is easy

to become so preoccupied with the survival needs of a church that the fulfillment of goals is more important than the experiences of the men who must carry them out. The farther a church gets away from the grounds of man's experiences the easier it becomes to substitute goals for people.

The more I considered my ministry the easier it became to understand how laymen could believe that their church membership has little to do with their work world. Like many of my colleagues, I held the attitude that administrative duties were second-rate experiences. They used time that might better have been spent with people's "real" needs. In an effort to justify this belief, activities such as small study groups were designated as the ones where the important experiences of the church occurred.

However, the layman is challenged to develop a faith relevant to his daily world which, of course, is filled with a myriad of mundane pressures he cannot escape; and his relationship to them is vital for his well-being. It is not hard for him to believe that his work experiences are not related to the ones his church considers important. At first I resented the churches' distance from the life I was now living. But my attitude changed as I gained some comprehension that this was no time to resent the church; it was time to visualize ways that a layman's church could help him search for these values.

In making a church such a resource, it seemed to me that the work experiences should be part of the church milieu. My work in the hospital made me aware of one principle that could be used. In evaluating a patient's in-hospital experience the demands of the environment to which he must return need to be taken into consideration. More than once personnel have been surprised to see a patient readmitted: "But he did so well when he was here!" Unfortunately, the conditions under which he functioned so adequately were

too far removed from those he faced outside the hospital.

This could be applied to experiences in a church, also. While activities may have values in, and of, themselves, the churchman does not live within the confines of his church environment. He is deeply committed to areas outside the church each with its own unique restricting demands and pressures. For his church experiences to be a resource they need to be evaluated in the light of the factors that will confront him in his world. The presence of reality conditions will discourage church activities from becoming means of escaping the demands of living. Instead they may serve to help a man meet his world

with added confidence, assimilating events that previously he tried to avoid.

Just what the specific factors might be and how to make them a functional part of a church would be a matter for careful study and experimentation. For myself, as a parish minister, a beginning will be to do what I can to make the congregation aware that workaday realities have a legitimate place in their church. It is their responsibility to discover the demands that they must assimilate to function and survive in their work setting. As the fellowship is then able to articulate these, we would search for ways open to the church to relate man more fully to the world in which he must work.

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