

A Church Faces Its World

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HOW has a local church, and its minister faced the problem of oncoming war during the last two years?" That was the nature of the question presented to three ministers by the editor, and this attempt to answer it is given in as a story of the thought and plan of one church during such a time.

The First Church in Hartford was "gathered" in 1632 when Thomas Hooker led a group of Puritans from England, first to Cambridge, and thence to the banks of the Connecticut River, where in 1636 they founded both the community of Hartford and their church. For three centuries it has maintained its essential quality as a Congregational church set in the heart of the city, and at the present time the spire of its Meeting House and the Traveler's Tower rise across the street from one another. Its membership resides in all areas of the city and is a cross section of the whole life of the community.

In regard to the war there has been utter freedom in all its life and program in regard to thought, expression, and affiliation. It is probably true to say (without a statistical survey) that a large majority of its members supported the position taken by the minister (which will be described below) and were either members of, or sympathized with, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies; that about 10 or 15 members were pacifists and members of the F. O. R.; and there were a few who were members of America First; of the 35 or more young men who have entered the service only one registered as a conscientious objector. There has not been one single incident during the last two years of any attempt to prevent any expression of opinion or of affiliation of any member, and the life of the church has proceeded with harmony and accord even in the times when the members were attending the different meetings of their groups and when the feeling regarding the is-

ssues rose to great intensity. It can be said without fear of contradiction that it has been proved that the members of a church can maintain with fervor and sincerity divergent views upon the crucial issues of life and yet find a bond of spirit greater than the diversity of mind.

The minister believed that he had a duty to reach a decision upon the major issue of this era and on Sunday, October 1, 1939, he said the Church must face the existence of evil in the world today which takes reality in personal and national forms, but in meeting it, must recognize the fundamental Protestant principle of freedom of choice as to methods, and also the conception of the Church as a fellowship of differing minds who seek the unity of the presence of Christ.

Three Positions for a Christian

Pointing out that war is a manifestation of evil in the life of the world as a carbuncle is a manifestation of an infected blood stream, he said that the Oxford Conference of 1937 had declared that there are three positions a Christian may take in meeting evil—the pacifist attitude of non-resistance; the use of force by participation in wars that can be called just; or by recognizing the right of the state to ask for civil obedience whenever it decides it must defend itself. He then said that most Christians find it impossible to be absolutists in any of these positions but realize that they will probably use all three in the varying circumstances of life.

Devoted men and women of the church may differ upon methods and techniques in seeking to achieve the same goal of a just and ordered world. Each Christian minister, and each church member, has the right to make any one of those attitudes his own, to stand by it, and to use it, but no minister or church member can declare his choice to be the only true

Christian stand because to do so would be a violation of his Protestant principle of the priesthood of each individual before God.

Then, on Sunday, May 20, 1940, when France was being invaded, he read a statement from the pulpit in which he said that it was his belief "that the efforts which the Allied Nations are making go beyond the question of their national existence to the existence of the way of life which we hold in common with them, and therefore, the war becomes our struggle as well as theirs. Being committed to the federation of the world for the establishment of justice and peace, our only possibility of achieving such a goal lies in the victory of those who will be willing to construct such a society of nations, for if Germany should win that hope would have to be abandoned. In order to accomplish that aim I urge that America make available to the Allied Nations all of our material resources they need, and that this help be given as soon as possible."

A year later, on May 22, 1941, the minister sent a message to all the members and said:

"A Christian may take one of three courses. He may be a pacifist; he may decide to fight only if American shores are invaded; he may decide to join now with those who are fighting for freedom across the world. The choice will be reached in the light of Christian conscience.

"As your minister, I hope that our church will contain members in all three of these groups. This is an inclusive church, for it is a free church, and its strength and power reside in the freedom we find in Christ. I hope that among us will be those who are pacifists; those who will fight only attack; and those who will join the hosts fighting for freedom everywhere.

"Underlying all these decisions will be the glorious reality of the fellowship of the people of the Church in the spiritual relationship with Christ as Lord and Saviour. With St. Paul, though we differ, we are one in Christ."

Activities in the Church Today

During the church year of 1940-41 much of the program of the church, both in its educational and organization life, was arranged to present the meanings of the ferment of the times and the deep and abiding spiritual meanings of life. Courses in world events; missionary efforts and personalities; issues of race, economics, and social life; and the meaning of the world church were presented. On one evening a professor of the Theological Seminary presented the pacifist position; a neighboring pastor, the isolationist viewpoint; and the minister gave his position.

When America entered the war on December 8, 1941, the Prudential Committee asked 25 members to constitute a Commission on War Services planned

with five functions—contacts with service men; use of the church buildings for activities and as a center for service men and defense workers; social service; interest in, and concern for, minority groups; study of post-war reconstruction and plans for an ordered world. The senior psychiatrist of the Hartford Neuro-Psychiatric Institute accepted the Chairmanship, and the Commission has been functioning in each of these areas with increasing effectiveness, its members being leaders in all walks of the city's life.

Like all churches in defense areas, this church has sought to serve the crowds of young workers. The only unique part of its work in this area has been the establishment of a recreational and fellowship program for those young workers who are on the "swing-shift," those who finish work at midnight. Each Sunday night the Church House is open from 11 P.M. to 3 A.M. and these young people come for that life they crave when everything else is closed.

All of this carries significance in one realm—the realization that Christians can discover and live by the abiding realities of the world about them while they differ as to technique and method of action. There has been a tendency in religion to insist that spiritual power is found only as we separate ourselves from the tensions of the world, or only as we agree unanimously upon technique and definition. Modern Christians long ago discarded the first view, but the hold of the second upon our minds has been harder to break. There are those among us still who insist that a Christian cannot be "Christian" unless he belongs to his sect of social thinking, just as in the generation before us there was the insistence upon belonging to the sect which held the correct theological view.

The meaning of the venture of this church lies in the realization that such an assumption can disappear, and that interventionists, isolationists and pacifists can hold to their positions with fierce sincerity; can think of the folk in the other groups as Christians; and, above all, can maintain and develop a constantly enriched experience of spiritual life together in the same church.

For this has been marked. During this time, in addition to maintaining the church and its benevolences, the people of the church raised a special gift to send out a new missionary; one-fifth of the membership pledged themselves to a year of sacrificial giving for war victims; and 121 have entered into a covenant with the minister to pray daily for each other and for the need of the world.

And so the story of this church in this time is simply another declaration of the affirmations which have been made from time immemorial in the quest for spiritual verity and reality—that one may face the stern realities of each present with courage and with faith; may stand in the freedom of conscience where-

with Christ set us free; may contribute to, and engage in, new ventures of the spirit in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles; discover differing definitions and techniques to express the abiding sanctions of life; and through it all find in the Church the peace of God that passes all understanding.

It is in such a conception of God and of life that we may believe the Church is in the war as it is in the world, and that only as the Church seeks the spiritual power which is born of great aims and aspirations while enduring the travail of the reality of life will it be able to lift the world into those richer experiences of life which alone can satisfy the human heart. Not exemption or divorce from the world, but conceptions

which transcend the present aims, must be the concern of the Church now. It is the Church that is in the world, and in the war, which will have the ability to declare—and declaring will be the accepted voice of America—that America dedicates herself to victory in this revolutionary struggle because she will dedicate herself to be the servant, and not the master, of the world; that she so believes in the dignity of the human spirit that she will extend that dignity to cover all men of good will without reservation; and that she will seek to establish a tranquility of order. Such a purpose is the source of spiritual power; such a concept will draw us into the only possible unity; such a hope is Emanuel—Christ with us.