

SECOND ANNUAL FAMILY AND FRIENDS LETTER

Dear Family and Friends,

I am nearing the end of the second year of my ministry, so let me bring you up to date on my activities and thinking. I have just been reading the letter I sent you 11 months ago, and I see that a large number of things have changed. First let me give you the titles of the sermons I have preached since I wrote last--just for the record and to give you a feeling of what I am doing:

The Meaning of Prayer

Perspectives on the Human Predicament and its Solution (a series begun last year; hereinafter

"PERSPECTIVES") 21. From Fleshly Life to Spiritual Life (The New Birth)

RELIGION OF THE HEAD AND RELIGION OF THE HEART: 1. Introduction

RELIGION OF THE HEAD AND RELIGION OF THE HEART: 2. The Christian Meaning of Creation

RELIGION OF THE HEAD AND RELIGION OF THE HEART: 3. Wishful Thinking and the Gift of

Hope

PERSPECTIVES: 22. From Guilt to Pardon (Atonement, Forgiveness)

PERSPECTIVES: 23. From Absurdity to the Non-absurd Life

The Future of McKinley Chapel (at Little Prairie new hymnals dedicated)

Does Following the Jewish Law Help Toward Salvation?

PERSPECTIVES: 24. From Exclusion to Inclusion (Being Grafted Into the People of God)

Natural Thankfulness and Christian Thankfulness

Being Set in Our Ways and Being Set in Our Purposes

RELIGION OF THE HEAD AND RELIGION OF THE HEART: 4. The Meaning of Biblical Inspiration

The Necessity of Searching for God

The Humanity of Christ

The Divinity of Christ

What is the Gospel? (at Northfield Methodist Church--pulpit exchange)

PERSPECTIVES: 25. From Fragmentation to Integration

Can We Know if We Are Saved?

PERSPECTIVES: 26. From Despair to Hope

An Existential Interpretation of the Gospel (at First Congregational (UCC)--First Baptist Church in

Northfield--pulpit exchange)

The Phony Doctrine of Immortality *

Death as a Natural Process *

The Deaths of Others *

Feeling Our Own Death *

* Lenten series on death

Death is Nothing *

How Did Christ Approach His Death? *

O Death, Where Is Your Victory? *

What Does it Profit a Man....?

Christianity Replaces Morality (at the Northfield Moravian Church--pulpit exchange)

PERSPECTIVES: 27. From Self-will to God's Will (The Living Sacrifice)

The Obedience of Law and the Obedience of Love

Are We Free from Sin When We Are Saved?

PERSPECTIVES: 28. From Depression to Joy

The Church as the Seat of Religious Illusions

Death (at the Dundas and Northfield Episcopal Churches--pulpit exchange)

PERSPECTIVES: 29. From Loneliness to Completeness

Farewell

This list of sermons reveals a number of things. First you notice that there are four pulpit exchanges. This is part of an ecumenical venture we developed among 7 churches in and around Northfield called the "Northfield Area Cooperative Ministry." All of these churches (five mentioned above and my two) are of denominations which are involved in the Consultation of Church Union (COCU), which will probably bring all the main-stream Protestant denominations together in another decade or so. We have pledged to work together when this would be more effective

than working separately. Besides these pulpit exchanges, we sponsored during Lent a Wednesday-night series of studies and worship for all the members of the NACM churches (about 1800 in all) at the new Northfield Methodist Church. I taught a course on a book by John Knox (one of my New Testament professors at Union Theological Seminary) The Death of Christ.

The "Farewell" at the end of the list indicates that I am leaving my present position. My reasons for this will be explained in a moment. This decision was one of the major imperuses for the formation of NACM. These 7 churches are presently served by 5 different men (the Episcopal minister also has two churches), but it was decided that they do not have enough members or financial resources to call for this many clergymen. So we began to look for ways in which fewer ministers could serve the same parish. The decision has been made to have the Moravian minister (who has a church of only 150 members) appointed to serve my two churches as well (another 150). Altho he will have three churches, he will still be serving fewer members than any of the other three remaining ministers. And his half-salary added to my half-salary will add up to a reasonable salary. The cooperative ministry will be concentrating on the areas of adult education and youth work to begin with. Later they may be able to cooperate in even more important ways. This will be one of the best things that has happened to Castle Rock and Little Prairie for many years. They are failing churches, but this will help them to have many more years of useful service.

The campus work I have been doing at Carleton and St. Olaf will be discontinued with my departure at the end of this month. There is certainly a need for a campus ministry here, but the need is not as great as at state institutions, which have no chaplains, religion departments, etc. Just to keep up the present work at the state campuses, it is necessary to tighten the belt here. It was also decided that there is no need for a distinctively Methodist program at these campuses. Perhaps some time in the future an ecumenical campus ministry will develop. In this second year of my work with students, I have been completely ecumenical anyway.

Besides keeping up with the more or less conventional patterns of campus ministry (primarily a Sunday evening fellowship), this year I have branched out into a very fruitful and exciting field, free universities. Both Carleton and St. Olaf started free universities this year, and I got in on the ground floor. For those of you who do not know what a free university is, allow me to explain. It is an informal collection of interest groups parallel to an accredited academic institution. The "free" refers to freedom in learning and teaching, altho it is also true that there are no fees or salaries. The course instructors or coordinators (students, faculty, administrators, townspeople, campus ministers, etc.) volunteer their time. The students pay no fees and receive no credits. There are no registrations, papers, exams, grades, regulations, and all the other paraphernalia of the conventional academic world. The free university then is able to experiment in courses which would not be offered in the college or university. New techniques of learning as well as new and unconventional areas are opened up. There is no limit to the possibilities. The free university movement is spreading almost everywhere. It is often a protest against irrelevant, meaningless, and impersonal education in the conventional institutions. The classes are usually small, and (most important as I see it) the people are there because they want to learn or to share or to do something that is impossible in the normal academic institution. The students are not there for inauthentic reasons such as the desire for a degree and a good job; they are not working for grades; they are not playing the academic game of "Outguess the Professor," which is fostered by the procedure of examinations and grades. In a way it is a return to the Medieval idea of the university as a community of scholars who study what they want to when they want to and how they want to. Our institutions of higher education are filled with people who are there for the wrong reasons and who are not interested in learning but only in beating the system. The free university movement serves as a collecting place for those really interested in learning something and as a goad to the conventional (and often conservative) academic institutions. Usually there is cooperation between the free university and the official university. At Carleton and St. Olaf the college facilities are available for free university classes. At some universities, the free university has pioneered in courses which were later accredited.

Before I get too far ahead of my story, let me indicate what I taught or coordinated in the free universities here in Northfield this year. These are not meant to indicate what is typical of a

free university (probably nothing is typical) but only what I am interested in teaching. I taught five courses this year (all met once a week in the evening): "An Existential Interpretation of Paul's Letter to the Romans," "Perspectives on the Human Predicament," "Four Dialogues in Existential Christianity: A Critique of Moralism," "Love," and "The Quest for Authentic Existence."

During the first term and the Interim at St. Olaf the Wednesday Evening Supper Club continued to meet for discussion. At Carleton there was a weekly meeting of the "Theological Forum." At the beginning of the year the second issue of "The Scream" (a magazine for college students of which I am the editor) appeared. I spoke once in each of the college chapels and was asked to officiate at a 'common meal' at Carleton.

My work in the churches continued at about the same level as last year. Besides all the activities which are too conventional to need recounting, we had a group of adults studying Rudolf Bultmann's Jesus and the Word. Another experiment was a weekly Koinonia Group which met to discuss matters of importance for our spiritual lives. On Good Friday as a part of the Holy Week services sponsored by the cooperative ministry, I spoke in the Carleton Chapel to people both from the town and from the college. And right now I am in the middle of a NACM-sponsored Bible Study on Second Corinthians.

TWO YEARS IN THE PULPIT

or

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT THE CHURCH

There are three great mission fields for Christianity: the mission to those who have never heard of Christ; the mission to those who have heard of Christ and rejected him; and the mission to those who have heard of Christ and accepted a substitute. The first is the foreign mission field; the second is the campus ministry; the third is the church. This may also be the order of increasing difficulty. Those who have never heard of Christ may find him just what they were looking for; so converting the pagans may be relatively easy. Those who have rejected Christ need to have him reexplained so that all their objections are met; this is difficult but not impossible. Those who have accepted a substitute need to be led to reject their "Christ" before the true Christ can dawn upon them; it is next to impossible to convert the "Christians." I have never tried foreign missions. I have had some success in the campus ministry. I have almost completely failed in the church.

This unfortunate encounter with the church occurred in two small rural congregations to which I was oddly assigned after having spent most of my life in large cities, having attended a 4400-member church, a 40,000-member college, and one of the largest, most metropolitan seminaries in the largest city in the Western world! I was assured that my parishioners would be fine, upstanding people, which they were. So I resolved to do my best to bring them the message of Christianity--even across the cultural gap that separated us. At least, thought I, the gap could not be as great as I would encounter in the foreign field. And it was not. With flexibility as my only method, I experimented around until I found the best way to pronounce the Christian message so that it could be clearly understood. I think what I was saying was understood, but to my consternation and puzzlement, it was not accepted. Then I discovered the reason: Most of my parishioners were suffering from an exotic disease I had never noticed before: Christocephalus (Christ on the brain). This malady (usually contracted in Sunday School) has the peculiar quality of endowing its victims with a complete immunity to Christianity!

I found that I had on my hands 100-plus believers of every age and description, but very few men and women of faith. Each had a well worked-out, comfortable version of "Christ" deeply imprinted on his brain. My well thought-out but simple sermons sailed out into the air, in search of an unguarded ear. But, alas, when one was found, the idea would sail in and straight out the other side without rearranging any of the furniture of the mind--without even blowing any of the dust off! I now understand why: every piece was firmly glued in place. And even if a particularly strong gust of thought found its way into the unwary mind and dislodged a piece of furniture, the occupant was quick to repair the damage by gluing the piece even more firmly in its original place. "Leave every piece of this furniture just where it is; if you move one piece, you will have to move them all. 'I've been a member of this church for twice as long as he's been alive! How can he pretend to tell us what Christianity is about?'"

I now understand what Barth meant when he said, "What have the churches to do with God?" Calvin also was right about the human mind being a factory of idols. And the familiar idols collected over the centuries are much more comfortable than the anxiety and risk of faith. Kierkegaard says somewhere, "What is more difficult than becoming a Christian when one is a pagan?" And he answers his own question, "Becoming a Christian when one already is one!" In other words, those who have "Christ" on the brain (in contrast to in the heart) have a harder time becoming Christians than those who have never heard of Christ or those who have rejected Christ--because they are convinced that they already have all the beliefs that anyone could ever find useful. New and different ideas are superfluous, and indeed unwanted. "Every minister we have had has had something good to say." Translation: "Every minister we have had has eventually hit upon something that I already believed."

Therefore both my parishioners and I have been unconstitutionally treated, that is, we have received "cruel and unusual punishment." They because their minister did not comfortably confirm their preconceptions but insisted on upsetting the whole idolcart and dangerously rocking the boat every Sunday. Some had to abandon ship to maintain their safety and "sanity." I because my creative and innovative powers were sent where they were least expected and less desired, where anything new is evil and change is always threatening. It would have been much better for the domestic peace and tranquility if they had been sent some boob who could recite the creed and tell them what they wanted to hear. They did not want a minister; they wanted a mascot--something to bark at the appropriate time to make them feel that their game is going well. And some didn't even think it was necessary to go and hear him bark. As long as they knew that they had a real, live mascot, they could carry on their games successfully--such as "Sunday School" or "Pass Along the Prejudices" and "Ladies' Aid" or "Aren't We Wonderful?"

In all seriousness, there were some real Christians in my churches, people who were totally committed to God, who were offering themselves to him as a living sacrifice. And there were a few who were sincerely searching for faith. I would estimate that about 5% of church members in the United States belong to each of these groups. The other 90% are playing a social game or a psychological game or just couldn't care less. And the church should be saved even for 10%. But a much better use of the few true ministers of the gospel could be had if the small churches were consolidated into larger arrangements so that those who refuse to be mascots will be able more effectively to minister. Some members will always be lost in such an operation, but they are among the 90% who are using the church for the wrong reasons anyway. None of the top 10% will be lost; none of those whose will is fused with the will of God and none of those who are deeply and truly in quest of faith will be lost. Denomination-supporting revenue will be lost, but more souls may be saved.

But if the percentage in Sodom falls below 10, the city will be destroyed. Then it will be time for a new reformation. The men and women of faith and those sincerely in search of faith will have to separate themselves from the Great Whore of Babylon and set up concerned societies like John Wesley's groups of people "struggling under the burden of their sin."

I have discovered that dialogue is by far the most effective method of getting Christianity across. The sermons are very important for setting up the framework, but only if the people are encouraged to express themselves in relation to these issues do their misunderstandings and disagreements appear. So I have decided that this is the primary way in which I will conduct any future work I may do in the church. There are some who will only come to hear the sermons. Most of them probably will not be significantly changed. But there will be the 10% who are interested in understanding the Christian faith more deeply. These people will come to small study groups. My comments about the motivation of free university students also apply here. 10 seems to be an ideal size for a dialogue group. Full-time with this kind of ministry plus Sunday preaching would require 50 concerned people--who would be willing to study and discuss year round. I would leave the administrative work to someone more interested in that end of the business and devote 5 nights a week to dialogue groups of various types. Some would discuss the sermons; some would study significant books in theology; some would study the New Testament; and some would get together to share their spiritual struggles. Even in my limited situation, I have tried all of these kinds of groups with considerable

success. The only limiting factor has been that there are so few who are interested in Christianity deeply enough to give it a few hours each week. If 10% of church members are either committed Christians or sincere searchers, then we would find 50 people interested in dialogue groups in a church of 500. I have set this number as a guide-line for myself in considering further parish appointments. To serve fewer people would waste my time and talents. It might also be possible that I could find a place on the staff of an even larger church, but I would absolutely insist that I be given none of the inauthentic duties of the minister. Less creative and less educated persons can do the administrative and much of the routine pastoral work. Perhaps there will come a time in my life when my creativity has run out when I will be glad to do these mundane churchly chores so that a more creative person can conduct a really important Christian ministry.

FUTURE PLANS

I have briefly indicated that I have had some success in the campus ministry. I think I have had as much or more influence on the campuses than in the churches—despite the fact that I spend more time in the churches. I think this is mainly because the college students are open to change; they are interested in seeing things in a different way. Altho I think I can work effectively with any group of concerned people, I think I will best be using my abilities to work with those who are intellectually alive. They raise more difficult questions which not every minister is able to answer. The concerned people in parishes like my own are wrestling with very real issues for their spiritual lives, but most of the intellectual problems of the faith have just not arisen for them.

But for the immediate future it does not appear that I will be paid for my campus work. The campus ministries of the major denominations have more candidates than openings. There is also a pronounced tendency toward the New Social Gospel, as I like to call it. This takes the form of concern for the obvious needs of our time: peace at home and abroad, racial and economic justice, etc. These are important social issues, but they are not distinctively Christian issues. My concern lies much closer to the issues raised in the New Testament. I am looking beyond the obviously needed reforms in our society and our world. If Utopia were accomplished, then we would raise the existential issues: Is there anything really worth living for? I think I would be a good complement to a campus ministry staff that would otherwise be exclusively concerned with social issues. But I suspect that there is even less demand for this kind of campus minister than for campus ministers generally.

Therefore I intend to do free-lance campus work. As I have already suggested, I will continue to teach in free universities (probably beginning at the Free University of Minnesota in Minneapolis) and do some writing in the same areas. Some conventionally-minded people who can only think of the church as a Sunday morning gathering will think that this change of pattern of ministry is "leaving the ministry." I will not be surprised if I hear of people using these very words to explain what has happened to me. But this is far from the way I understand it. I am still dedicated to helping people receive God's grace. I have found the conventional church too difficult a place for the Christian gospel to be heard. There are too many distractions and illusions that have gathered around the church for it to be an effective instrument of God. If only 10 concerned people read what I write or if only a dozen people are significantly affected by knowing me, then I shall have been more effective than I presently am in the church (not counting my campus work). As I see it, this is a move to a more effective ministry in every respect. If I am wrong, if I have even less effect in this free-lance campus ministry than I have had in the churches (hard to imagine), I will gladly return to the church. Winston Churchill once said something like this, "Democracy is absolutely the worst form of government—except all the others that have been tried." Perhaps after a couple of years away from the institutional church, I will say, "The church is absolutely the worst means of proclaiming the gospel—except all the others." Altho I am open to this, I really doubt it. Until I try it, no one will know. I think that my free-lance ministry will be able to do everything the institutional church is able to do and much more. I think it will be increasingly true that the church will be a mill-stone around the neck of the campus minister. In my teaching in free universities, I have discovered students who are prejudiced against ministers and against anything that is associated with the church. I can't say that I blame them a great deal. There are lots of preachers proclaiming idiotic doctrines and churches hopelessly behind the times.

I plan to live on my savings until I am offered a position that uses my abilities without wasting my time on routine matters that could be done by almost anyone. I intend to maintain my connection with the United Methodist Church in the hope of being employed to do what I will already be doing--or something similar. I might accept a part-time position working with small groups. I don't know how other ministers feel, but I would gladly forgo half of my salary if I could also lose the half of my responsibilities that have no Christian significance.

Further formal education is out of the question because of my view of the bankruptcy of the academic world. As soon as someone develops a program to help people become creative thinkers instead of processors of information, I will be glad to hear about it.

The Christian ministry is very fulfilling work, but unlike other work in which the fulfillment comes as a result of success, the complete fulfillment is granted even before the work is undertaken.

6-26-68

Dear Uncle Wesley,

Since we communicate about once a year, there is a lot to read here, but you have doubtless done so at your leisure.

I suppose you will be sending out your "F&F" sometime soon. My new address is:

James Park

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U.S.A.

We have been watching the recent election in Canada with interest. I hope the new government lives up to promise. Last night I was up until 12:30 (Northfield time) listening to the results from the CBC in Toronto. Social Credit was completely wiped out I guess. I hope this finds you and yours all well.

Yours,

James Edward Park