

THE
PARISH MEETING
 AT WORK

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ALAN ECCLESTONE

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LONDON

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*Reverend Alan Ecclestone,
Holy Trinity Church, Darnall, Sheffield, 1942-1969*

relevance of our faith to daily life”. Nowhere else in the life of the Church have we such an opportunity to learn together the facts of the situation, the pressures of the world upon our fellow-Christians, their daily conflicts in the common faith, and the possible ways by which a Christian standard may be upheld. It is quite certain that there will be differences of opinion, “but if the Church is a fellowship in Christ, it should be able to carry within itself differences of opinion and the possibility of diverse judgements.” Times without number we have heard it said that an argument in the works or office had been raised, and “I didn’t know what to say”. The experience of the Parish Meeting has been that people have found themselves equipped to reply, because over months and years they have been grappling with these problems in the context of the Meeting.

We look forward, then, to the time when our parochial system is transformed by the formation of these groups of men and women who in the Parish Meeting have found a new vision of the Church to which they belong. We have confined attention in this handbook to the actual working of the Meeting, and left unsaid many of the reflections upon the significance of the Meeting which are borne out by this experience. To bring out of her treasures things new and old is the prerogative of the Church. Nor the least of these is the beginning of a practical rediscovery of the meaning of *Koinonia*— the common life of the Body of Christ.

into a very decided relationship towards it, and this on a level that no other line of action can give us. Its purposes have become ours, its life our own. We do not talk about this corporate life, because we regard it as life that needs no such qualification. The Meeting is the focus and expression of it.

Secondly, there is corresponding gain in the knowledge of each other. In no other way could we hope to become so truly “Christianly” acquainted with other people. It has been a familiar matter of experience for many who previously had seen each other in church and had only known each other by sight, to find through the medium of the Meeting a quite different quality of relationship. If the essential character of the Christian Church, the “I in you, you in me” relationship is to be laid hold of, if the Holy Communion presupposed by the Holy Communion is to be known, then we are almost justified in asking how else are we to realize what this means save through the opportunity of the Meeting. Nowhere else in the life of the local Church have we comparable opportunity to develop this experience of truly belonging to each other.

Even more clearly can we point to the undoubted gain afforded by the Meeting in respect of the work of the Church in the world. It has been said with justice that “the failure of the Church to guide men in the field of morals has been chiefly due to the fact that in its corporate life at all levels there has been so little free discussion of all the problems. The pulpit can only help up to a point.” Because the Church has not been ready to give help to lay people by lay people— nor to elucidate the concrete issues faced by them in the factory, the office, and the shop—in a gathering such as the Parish Meeting, it is small wonder that churchgoers tend to be largely indistinguishable from the rest of the world. It is the special business of the Parish Meeting to make possible week by week “the free frank discussion touching the

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This second edition of *The Parish Meeting At Work* amends some of the language to reflect changes to writing practices of referring to humanity rather than 'man' or 'men', and the fact that women as well as men may now be priests in some Christian denominations.

Andrew Ecclestone

Wellington, New Zealand

September 2023

agenda for such a meeting. Let one or two parishes simply pay a friendly visit to each other's Parish Meetings and see for themselves what is being done. Let them discuss what they have already found to be their greatest problems or their strongest resources. Let them attempt to draw up a plan of common action. What matters most is the discovery of the foundations of our common life.

6. DO YOU FIND IT A SUCCESS?

This question is so often asked by those who make inquiries about the Parish Meeting that it cannot be left out. It is difficult to answer it without first finding out what the inquirers mean. Too often, one suspects, they mean by success an undoubted increase in the Sunday congregation and a general sense of the popularity of the Meeting. Both these are good and pleasant things, but they are not the immediate test of the value of the Meeting.

The Parish Meeting is not a means to an end, and certainly not to such an end as that of doubling the congregation. It must first be recognized for what it is in itself, the assembling of the Church to realize what it means to be the Church; and in so far as the Church does this, the Parish Meeting is doing the thing we look for. Its further work is to press forward from this point and week by week to work out the implications of the Faith. But we can no more say whether it is a success than we can say whether the Holy Communion is a success. It is far better to confine ourselves to a discussion of what actually has occurred.

In the first place, those who come undoubtedly gain a deeper sense of the corporate nature of the Church. In so far as the work of the Meeting runs true, it is impossible to take one's place through several months and years in the work without growing

Parochial Church Council following upon the usual weekly Parish Meeting, thus incorporating the agenda of the Parochial Church Council in the work of the Parish Meeting. Clearly there is no need to lay down any suggestion of fixed relationships, but simply to insist that the Parish Meeting is not an organization.

(c) *"Over the wall"*.

The danger that the Parish Meeting may become too engrossed in its own affairs has been noticed earlier on. The remedy must always lie in an insistence upon as wide a conception of the work of the Church as we can possibly develop. In connection with this, it is important that the fullest use should be made of the opportunities afforded by local relationships. There is a very great need that groups of parishes should learn to work together. They can do this only so far as they are learning to see the common task of the Church from a common point of view, and it is just this which is so often missing. No one supposes that the Church in England is suffering from the obliteration of parochial diversities, however much the machinery of centralization increases. But we cannot rest satisfied with mere diversity of tradition and practice. What is needed is the chance to enable this rich diversity to contribute to a common inheritance much more vigorously than it does at present. It is here that the Parish Meeting can do important work. Bound to no particular tradition of Church practice, it can flourish and invigorate them all. It can, moreover, be the means of reaching out from behind the parochial boundaries to enable the people to take action together.

A start can always be made by holding joint Meetings to compare experience and to discuss common problems. It has already been found that such efforts to link up parishes in this way are immensely influential in widening the whole conception of the work of the Church. There is no need to have an elaborate

INTRODUCTION

This is not an attempt to discuss the significance of the Parish Meeting and its place in the life of the Church to-day. It is simply concerned with practical matters arising out of the work of the Meeting. Almost every week, inquiries are made about the conduct of the Meeting—"How do you begin? What do you do? What are the difficulties?"—and it is to try to answer these questions that these notes have been put together. There are no authorities on the Parish Meeting; there are only those who are working away in their parishes and finding out for themselves what tremendous things are happening. Nevertheless there is now a body of experience to draw upon for help and guidance for those who are just beginning. Some use of this experience may help to sustain new-comers in their times of difficulty.

As practical advice, it nevertheless raises the most far-reaching questions, and it has been necessary to say a little about the way in which we regard the Parish Meeting. We misconceive the matter if we suppose that it does not raise questions which affect our whole conception of the life of the Church, the work of the clergy, and the position of the laity. It asks indeed that we should re-examine the whole job of the Church in the context of our changing world. No one is more affected by this than the parish priest. Most thoughtful people are conscious of this, of the need to revise their conception of the work of the ministry, of the extent to which the field of parochial work has altered. The Parish Meeting has come into being as a reflection of this change. Emphatically it is not a way of escape from difficulties nor an easy attempt to find a solution. Throughout these notes, the work of the parish priest is described in terms that call for more, not less, imagination, faith, and courage. Indeed it may well appear that the capacity of the parish priest to adapt themselves to the

changed relationships that the Meeting calls for and that the times suggest, is *the* fundamental problem. From time to time we hear of Parish Meetings being dropped— “because they did not work”. Behind that explanation is most commonly to be found an incomplete understanding of what it really needed, and as a consequence, an attempt to carry on the Meeting in ways which were self-defeating. It is true to say that no one has more to learn from the Parish Meeting than the parish priest themselves. They can learn more from it than from almost anything else. The root question is whether we really want to learn. To those who do, these comments on the day-to-day problems of the Parish Meeting are addressed.

1. WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO BEGIN

The Parish Meeting is the assembling of the local Church, the Church in the parish, in order that it may realize and work out its essential life. It is a meeting whose character is implied in the New Testament word “fellowship”. It is a meeting, the agenda or business of which is the whole life and work of the Christian Community in the world. It can be described on the one hand with the utmost simplicity: that week by week the members of the Church in the parish meet together to talk over, plan, execute, and report upon the work of the Christian Church in whose life they share. It must be recognized on the other hand that in this matter we are making the most tremendous claims; that this meeting is nothing less than the representation of the Body of Christ, which in the very power and commission of Pentecost is setting about its work and revealing its life. We are not talking about an organization devised by a parish priest and enjoyed by some parishioners. We are not talking about a study group, a prayer meeting, a business meeting, a consultative committee, a social. We are not thinking in terms of Chairman, Secretary,

together we are assembling the Church of God. The Church may delegate to some of its members particular duties and responsibilities. The Established Church will certainly need statutory definition of some of these responsibilities. In respect of these the Parochial Church Councils have clear duties to perform. But always there resides in the Church itself as the Body of Christ certain responsibilities which it may not finally delegate, and of which it may not be relieved by any statutory action. These responsibilities are laid upon it by Christ himself, and meeting in his Name it accepts them. There need be no quarrel over the division of responsibilities.

This means in practice that the discussions at the Parish Meeting will do two things that have a bearing on the work of the Parochial Church Council. In the first place they will provide a far richer, more informed, and more alert Christian mind for the working of the Church and therefore do something which the Parochial Church Councils have never done to any satisfactory degree. In the second place they will make possible far more sustained and intensive discussion upon matters which affect the spiritual welfare of the parish than the Parochial Church Councils have generally given themselves the opportunity to enjoy. When therefore the Parochial Church Council meets to transact its business, it does so against a background of more mature and more continuous thinking on matters that affect the parish than we should otherwise have. There is no reason why the Parochial Church Council meeting should not be held as a continuation of the Parish Meeting, especially as so many of the people who have taken their Christian membership seriously enough to take a regular part in the Parish Meeting are likely to be elected to serve on the Parochial Church Council. In practice, it has been found in one parish that the most convenient way of relating the two has been to hold a quarterly meeting of the

answer the question of Bible-study. There can be no doubt whatever of its importance. The Bible contains our title-deeds. For that very reason we must be more and not less aware of the extreme importance of being frankly realistic in our study of it, and must refuse to be led away into any day-dreaming about it. Above all we must be really learners, ready to admit that hard sayings baffle us now as they did the disciples long ago. Because we have had the Bible in our hands so long, we have in a curious way become unconsciously arrogant about it. It does not come easily to us to admit that we do not know what it means at this very moment in this very passage. The Parish Meeting makes good use of its Bible-study if it constantly brings us honestly to admit the truth.

(b) *The relation of the Parish Meeting to the Parochial Church Councils.*

There have been, are, and will be in the future some problems connected with this question which only a long experience and considerable wisdom can help us to solve. It should be understood, however, that nothing which is said or claimed for the Parish Meeting here is intended in any way to imply that Parochial Church Councils should be discarded or ousted from their rightful position. But what is claimed for the Parish Meeting is something that links us up with Pentecost itself, and with the holy and life-giving powers of God, so that the question we have to face is more properly how far the Parochial Church Councils help in the extension of our work, and not how far the Sacraments, the Word, and the Meeting help us in holding a Parochial Church Council.

There is every likelihood that a certain suspicion will greet the appearance of the Parish Meeting as being a kind of rival to the Parochial Church Council. To deal with that we must continually go back to our insistence that in calling the Parish Meeting

minutes, correspondence, and agenda. We are talking about the Church, whose primary business is to be the Church. The Parish Meeting is to be thought of in these overwhelming terms or it is better left alone.

How then do we arrive at this? In every parish church, Sunday by Sunday, a number of Christian people come together to take part in an act of worship. When this is concluded, they disperse. They have "been to church". Very many of them do not meet or see each other again until they repeat this "going to church". Some of them belong to and take part in various social functions arranged by various organizations, for boys and girls, men and women. From each of these things they derive much that is important, delightful, and valuable. A few people, however, have possibly felt that there is something missing from this weekly round as the expression of the corporate life of the Christian Church. The services may well have been offered to God with all sincerity and earnestness, with beauty and devotion; the social and moral witness afforded by one or more of the organizations may have been diligently and courageously performed. But is this the whole of the Christian life? Is this all that the membership of Christ's Body means? Is there not something else, presupposed alike by the services and the personal witness, something else out of which the services and the personal witness may be said to issue, which is unfortunately scarcely visible and hardly known, to which could be given a name like "the Body" or "the Fellowship"? Is there not something else, more conscious of itself and its work than the congregation in the pews can often claim to be, more active, disciplined, purposeful, informed, and spiritually alert than the meetings of the organizations that we know? The parish priest knows only too well that they find themselves praying, "Would that there were", for apart from this even the most successful organizations and the most uplifting services

would appear to be almost beside the point. For the services are the services of the Church, and the organizations are designed to be the handmaids and servants of the Church. But what is the Church? What is its shape, its look, its nature, and its purpose?

Once in a year, the people of the parish are still summoned to a meeting of the Church: “the Annual Parochial Church Meeting”. A comprehensive agenda is provided, which by the inclusion of “other matters of parochial and general Church interest” is made as wide as anyone could wish it to be. In practice the financial, electoral, and domestic issues of the life of the congregation occupy most of the time, so that little opportunity is afforded to anyone to be able to see how the business transacted springs from or is related to the doctrines, devotion, and witness of the Christian Church. How rarely do we pause in the conduct of this annual meeting to give ourselves liberty to examine the Christian significance of what we are doing! “But there isn’t time, this is not the place.” Exactly. Where then is the place and when is the time, for the Christian congregation to be able to examine its corporate life and purpose? Such examination is plainly necessary for many reasons. The general confessions of the Church services certainly imply general self-examinations; if not, they are reduced to being simultaneous personal confessions. The evangelistic work of the Church is certainly supposed to be more than the efforts of the incumbent. The pastoral concern of the Church does not exempt its individual members from a particular responsibility in these matters. But where, when, and how are all these things to become the genuine concern of the members of the Church if we have only the Annual Meeting?

It is when we are ready to see what is involved in this demand that we can recognize how right and necessary the Parish Meeting is. We can explain for the moment that such a meeting is the Annual Meeting shorn of its lone dignity, and freed from the

use of them. One social worker invited to the Parish Meeting was able to point out how much those working in one field of social service hoped that Christian people would take a more active interest in the work.

The field is nevertheless not quite as wide as we should try to make it. It is our job to help more people to see that things they have never connected with religion have aspects which we must not neglect. What does the ordinary congregation make of the Arts? By this we mean not simply a concern for religious drama, music, and architecture, but much more a concern for what the artist in any field is trying to do. If, as we suggest, the Christian is a person sensitive and alive to values in life, she or he is presumably very much concerned with the extending and growing of these things. They are a person truly committed to the job of making communication richer and fuller than it has ever been before. If real life is meeting, then the channels through which we achieve this meeting are of great importance. The arts are points at which our sensitiveness to life is heightened, and where our meetings are rendered more inclusive of spiritual values. What then does our Parish Meeting do about them? Our experience suggests that from time to time we should discuss with the help of well-informed people what is being done by artists, sculptors, musicians, writers, who are breaking new ground in their work. One of the most valuable of such discussions took place when an artist in charge of a “Design in Living” exhibition came to the Meeting and explained its purpose. It is when Christian people begin to see the importance of teapots that pour properly and drawers that do not jam that we begin to apply some of our standards to daily living.

It is with this application of the attention of the Parish Meeting to the aspects of daily living which are not yet commonly the subjects of Church discussions, that we return to

discovered, from which indeed we hope to return to the difficult patches with second wind. What do you do then, asks one harassed priest, with one or two people who simply will not let things alone? There are always some who will drag in the political issues, no matter what we are discussing. The answer is that we must build our own reputation for fairness and for keeping to the point. It calls for all the wisdom and the courage we are likely to possess, and few things make it quite so clear that the Parish Meeting is of incalculable importance. For it is in the face of admittedly deep divisions derived from politics that we must discover our unity. But we can head off the person who drags in “politics” every time only by showing how willingly we can admit and face political problems some of the time.

One other aspect of this matter should be mentioned here. Apart from “party” questions, there are many topics which spring from our social life to-day that can profitably be discussed as welfare matters which as citizens we are all concerned in. It is most useful, for example, to find out how the public bodies which administer the social services are run, to create a genuine concern for their efficient running, and to make clear the extent of Christian obligation in respect of them. It is all too often lamented that Church people have left these things to others far too much, and that not enough interest is taken by Christians in Trade Unions, Local Government, and the various civil welfare bodies. The charge is very largely true. One of the most important things the Parish Meeting has to do is to direct the attention of its members to these secular fields in which our obedience to God is to be worked out. This will not be done unless we are able to convince people of the obligation to extend our conception of the terms of Christian service. At all times, then, the windows of the Parish Meeting must be open to this secular world, and it is here that, if we are to have speakers to help us, we should make the best

constraints of endeavouring to work through an agenda for which so little time is allowed that it inevitably becomes almost entirely lacking in Christian significance. Let us suppose that we convert our annual meeting into a weekly meeting or add to our annual meeting fifty-one other opportunities to grapple with “other matters of parochial and general Church interest”. We have, by so doing, given the members of the Church the opportunity and the responsibility of doing so much more than the Annual Meeting could ever hope to do. We have provided ourselves with the opportunity for all those matters, evangelistic, pastoral, devotional, which it is properly the concern of the members of the Church to face and consider. But we have done more than this. We have given the opportunity for the Church to assemble to be the Church, and we can begin to discover what it really looks like and what its work is.

How then do we begin? Almost everything depends upon the right approach which so far we have implied in theological terms. To this conception of the Parish Meeting as the assembling of the Church we must constantly return if we are to deal wisely with the problems that arise. It should be emphasized from the beginning that in holding the Parish Meeting we are not creating another organization in the parish to which people who have a taste for discussion or an evening to spare can come. Indeed, we cannot hope to find a place in the crowded week of so many parochial organizations for the Parish Meeting unless we can lift it right out of the sphere of competition from the outset. In the long run we shall not be able to sustain it in the face of difficulties unless we can regard it as of obligation.

All this means that in practice we must begin at a point beyond the usual idea of a discussion group or Padre’s hour. It means also that we must begin at a point beyond the Parochial Church Councils. We shall discuss in greater detail later on the

relationship between the Parish Meeting and the Parochial Church Council. Here it may be said that we are concerned with something older than the statutory organizations; and to the churchwarden who once objected that he did not find Parish Meetings in the Enabling Act, we should reply that even so we find them in the New Testament.

It is important, therefore, that before the Parish Meeting is begun some members of the congregation should understand this very well and should be willing to accompany the parish priest when they set out on this adventurous course. It should be explained as carefully as possible from the pulpit or discussed more fully in a parochial Convention before the first meeting is held. No doubt should be left in the minds of the members of the congregation that while we are not investing our own creation with sacred authority, we are endeavouring to allow the embodiment of something which is holy, which is Christ's, and which is our most sacred concern.

This means in practice that we must choose one night of the week for the Meeting, and see that no organization holds its meetings at this time. We should not dream of allowing such a thing to occur at the time when the whole family of the Church was met together for the Holy Communion. We must be no less exacting for the Parish Meeting. It is worth while spending some time in both clearing the ground for the Parish Meeting in the weekly parochial timetable and in making it clear that it will be a fixture when it is established.

Is it necessary to meet weekly? Quite obviously local circumstances must be considered, but it is our conception of the nature of the meeting that must determine our decision. We usually expect that the congregation of the faithful will assemble each week for worship. This meeting is the counterpart, the other

not simply in order that he or she may know the text to be studied but much more that they may themselves be faced with the difficulties it presents. When we spoke earlier on of wrestling, it was with the implication that this wrestling was a reality for everyone. The unreality which creeps into so much of our Bible-study is due as much as anything to the fact that while we have to work out the problems of daily life, the difficulties of the Bible are for so many of us academic and not vital to our lives.

The force of this is very clearly emphasized when we turn to a different problem, that of politics. "Do politics come into the discussion at the Parish Meeting?" Since we began by insisting that all matters which enter our daily life are the proper concern of the Meeting, we can hardly avoid the wide range of subjects which have their roots in politics. To do so would be at once to excise from our programme matters of great concern to our social and personal life. The difficulties are very real, and we can appreciate the attitude which so often finds expression in forbidding "Religion and Politics" from discussion because both these subjects produce a deeply controversial note. We have heard of one Parish Meeting which decided to do Bible-study because current topics were too controversial. Certainly it would be easier if we could avoid the tensions which politics set up, but nothing is really gained by running away. What we have to learn is the much more difficult task of declaring and maintaining our differences in politics, and investigating the roots of them, within the acknowledged unity of the Church. Something is terribly wrong if the Church is any one Party at prayer to the exclusion of the others. Common sense must obviously be our guide. We must neither run away from nor run madly into the turmoil which the political scene presents. There are times when it is inexpedient to press the political issues further; when it is much more advisable to turn to matters where common ground is more easily

pews thinks of the Bible. They can be more natural in reading it and talking about it than the layperson. They can read it with some of the necessary historical transposition and theological understanding that surmount so many difficulties. But the literal approach which so quickly shows itself in the Parish Meeting at once reveals the difficulties. We are studying, for example, the Sermon on the Mount. We encounter the remarks on our attitude to borrowers, and at this point one of two things is likely to happen. Either the difficult words are read and passed over without a remark, as if implying that of course we all know how to apply them to an importunate borrower of our acquaintance, or else some person, possibly the parish priest, breaks in and exclaims that this is not quite as acceptable to any of us as our silence suggests. In other words we are not really facing the difficulties. Because this book is the Bible we are passing over remarks of which we should certainly be more critical if we met them elsewhere. To make matters worse, it is common to find that, if we are challenged to say how we think that so many of these difficult things are to be faced, phrases like "We must have faith" promptly make their appearance. As statements they may be unexceptionable, but they are often used to cover up the most awkward gaps in our thinking. The result is that we tend to emerge from our time of Bible-study with a new note of unreality in our discussion.

To overcome this, it would appear to be more profitable to do our Bible-study in very close relation to the actual problems of the day, drawing upon the Bible as we go along for comment, rather than reading ahead chapter by chapter. It is useful, for example, to study a subject with Bible-references, or to build up a vivid picture of the Ministry of our Lord, or even to work out the meanings we attach to phrases like the Kingdom of God. All this really requires great preparation on the part of the parish priest,

self, of the worshipping body. The occasions of its meeting should certainly be not less frequent than the minimum attendance which we look for in the life of the worshipping Church.

Whom shall we expect to come? It is clear that we shall look for the assembling of all those who take seriously their membership of Christ's Church. It is right that they should be asked to attend. As soon as the newly-confirmed have taken their place in the communicating at the altar, it is right to expect and invite them to be present at this meeting. Young and old, girls and boys, men and women, all are there, because of our common life in the Body of Christ.

No doubt the practical difficulties appear to be immense. "How is it possible," asks someone, "to expect such varieties of ages to be at ease and at home in one meeting?" "How is it possible," asks another, "to keep the interest sustained for such diverse groups?" "How is it possible," asks a third, "if the worshipping congregation already numbers several hundreds?"

For most of these and many kindred questions there are now some answers provided by experience, and further experience will certainly enable us to extend them. Quite clearly it can never be easy to sustain the interest of the younger people on some aspects of the business of the Meeting, and it is equally true that most adults find it no less difficult at times. What matters is our use of common sense about this, and particularly in the case of the parish priest when they are actually guiding the progress of the Meeting. It is a matter of experience that it is wiser to be ready to deal with most subjects in instalments carried over several weeks than to try to cover them in a single meeting. The agenda of every meeting should normally contain a variety of subjects, touching all kinds of aspects of the Christian life, and the one who steers the Meeting should be alert enough to recognize when it is time

to leave one subject for another. That does not mean that big demands on the attention should not be made, but it does mean that the leader should be intensely aware of the difference between hard-working and over-working. In an age which frequently laments the lost art of conversation, it is not likely that we shall become masters of group discussion in a few weeks. Inevitably we shall make mistakes, and people will be bewildered, confused, over-talkative, far too glib, over-reticent, resentful, suspicious. Inevitably we shall lose some people after experiences of this kind. Those who tend to monopolize the conversation will have their victims, and those who look for neat and tidy results will complain that we seem to talk and get nowhere. It is then that we shall need to be reminded that we go into this business of the Parish Meeting as a matter of obligation, determined to carry it through when it no longer proves to be so exciting.

The question of numbers is also a matter in which experience alone can help us. In practice the number of people who will put themselves to the trouble of attending a weekly meeting of this kind is far smaller than the number of those who will "go to church" for services. We are much more likely in most parishes to be concerned with tens than with hundreds. Even so, the best possible way of enabling hundreds of fellow Christians to work out the implications of their common Christian life can be discovered only by practice. Such experience as we have already suggests certainly that there is a limit to the number of people who can enter into this entirely informal and very personal relationship of the parish meeting, and that, where numbers continued to grow, a hiving-off process might conceivably be the solution. But so far we are not faced with this kind of difficulty. What we have to face at the moment is the great problem of how to use every moment of the Meeting so as to enable the very mixed group of people who attend to take the fullest part in what

There are obvious occasions when the Meeting can be called upon to offer its evening's work and join in saying: "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, our lives and labours, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee." It rests with the parish priest to sense the mood and outcome and need of the Meeting and to lead it in prayer accordingly. It may be that a collect will gather up the whole significance of what has been said and done, but what matters specially is that, if we are to pray at all, we should so pray that the particular meeting with all its problems, purposes, happinesses, stumblings, should be related to the eternal Wisdom, Love, and Patience of God, and his Holy Spirit in whose Name and Power we meet.

5. SOME SPECIAL QUESTIONS

(a) *What place has Bible-study in the Parish Meeting?*

The question can best be answered by drawing as fully as we can from actual experience. One evening we faced the matter in this way. "Why do we do our Bible-study so badly? Why do we so often find that a large number of people at once relapse into silence?" For the plain fact was that a slight feeling of unreality appeared to descend upon the Meeting. Some explanation may be given by going back to what was said earlier about reading books aloud in the Meeting. Even the most ordinary reading-matter sets up a kind of barrier, and introduces a break in the conversation. How much more then, when what is read is in Bible language, when a traditional text-employing mode of usage has bedevilled the approach, and when there is a certain feeling that this is all remote from our world. All these things are far greater difficulties than most clergymen ever suppose. Their own education and training have been so largely literary and Biblical that they find it difficult to imagine just how the person in the

do this, it is not necessary that every Meeting should somehow be pulled into the support of a resolution, or that some neat and tidy declaration must be produced if the Meeting is not to be described as a failure. But it is clearly desirable that the parish priest should point to some of the most significant things that have emerged from the discussion, and to tie one or two of them together so that they present a reasonably ordered train of thought. All this must be done quickly and unobtrusively or it is better left alone. It is not an art that can be easily acquired. It calls for the whole of a person's attention throughout the Meeting if they are both to follow each turn and twist of the discussion and to arrive at certain distinctive points at the end.

Secondly it is desirable that before anyone leaves the Meeting that there should be time for prayer. So far we have said nothing whatever of praying in the Meeting. There are Parish Meetings which open with hymns and prayers in church or in the room used for the Meeting. There are others which do none of these things. The chief aim should be the right ordering of what is done in the Meeting by setting it all in its most natural and simple relation to God in prayer. There may be times in the middle of the Meeting when it would be most valuable to suspend our talking and to pray together. It is certainly important that if we pray at the beginning or the end of the Meeting we should do it together, and especially that there should be no question of formality about it. At times it can be in perfect silence, at others extempore prayer that catches up the matters of discussion, at others a remembrance of the unity of the Body with some special recollection of those who are sick, distressed, or sorrowing, as well as of those other quite normal things of human life, of people starting to live in another parish, another house, another land, of men and women starting a new job, of people going into the Forces. The more clearly the sense of the family is given the better.

is going on. To deal with those problems we shall need to discuss the actual running of the Meeting.

One further point, however, may be dealt with here. It has been objected from time to time that the title "Parish Meeting" is a misnomer, since only a very small proportion of the people in the parish attends. To this we may reply at once that the same objection may be levelled at the "Parish Communion", and, today, with some justice at the Book of Common Prayer. Our use of this title is more a declaration of our purpose than of our achievement. We are trying to make it clear that this meeting is for everyone and not for a few. We are trying to throw down from our side any barriers that might otherwise be thought to exist. At all costs we must resist the tendency to assemble a small coterie or clique. We must do everything we can to make it clear that the Meeting welcomes all who are willing to come. Names which suggest any narrower basis are therefore to be avoided. There is nothing final in the use of "Parish Meeting". If someone can think of a better name, by all means let us use it. In the country districts, especially, there may be some confusion with the civil Parish Meeting. What matters is the making clear that while we use the Parish as our territorial basis and as an indication of our sphere of action, our doors are open to all. Our picture of the Meeting is that of people in a series of concentric rings according to the degree with which they see their attachment and obligation to the Body. They are moving backwards and forwards continually, pressing more closely to the heart of it when spirits are kindled, retreating in times of coldness and disillusionment. This continual shift and change in attachment and response is part of life. What still matters is our sense of belonging to the Body and our admitted need to come back to it.

2. THE CONDUCT OF THE MEETING

Where shall we hold the Meeting? The question is not unimportant, because our intention is to try to get as far as we can from the usual atmosphere of meetings. We are thinking in terms of a family coming together and it is in the setting of a home that we should most naturally desire to meet. How can we get this? It is far better to be crowded in the Vicarage than to be spaciouly accommodated in the Parish Hall or the School. That does not mean that we must rule out either of these, but that we must always take trouble to see that the impression given by the surroundings is friendly, informal, unofficial, and capable of making people feel at ease with each other.

The force of this applies specially to the actual conduct of the Meeting. What is the job of the parish priest in this respect? From the beginning it should be understood that their position here is vastly different from that of the preacher in the pulpit, the chairperson in the chair, the lecturer on the platform, simply because the Meeting itself is different from any other kind of gathering. The people here are not assembled to hear an address but to talk together, to communicate with each other, and therefore the chief thing is to enable that activity to become as valuable as we can make it. On the other hand the conversation is not aimless and it requires steering. The parish priest is possibly the best person for this job, but this should not be taken for granted, and it is important that the Meeting should not become totally dependent upon the priest being there. While the very nature of the Meeting as we have described it makes it clear that normally they will be there, the Meeting must certainly go on when the priest is absent. It must be possible to call on others to take the priest's place as a result of the experience they have gained from being familiar with the way in which it is done. Nor

conceivably produce. The correction of this lies, not in crying down the local effort but in extending our knowledge. The position of the parish priest is in this respect a key position. It is their job to keep the balance between a continual incitement to more and more local effort (thus sustaining the conviction that it is of real importance), and a generous acceptance of traditional experience and wisdom derived from elsewhere.

One other feature of the ordinary Meeting we have tried to describe demands our attention. Coming into a session of a well-established Meeting, we may be curious to know how homogeneous this gathering is. Experience suggests that, over a very few years, the composition of the Meeting changes as new members join. The consequence of this is that it is continually necessary for the elementary lessons to be frequently rehearsed. Otherwise we run the risk of newcomers getting no chance to become acquainted with those basic matters by virtue of which the Meeting has come to its present maturity. To go over these things again and again requires no small degree of patience, but the strength of the Meeting undoubtedly depends upon our willingness to do so.

How then does the Meeting end? Every variety of ending can be contemplated, but there are two things that experience confirms as valuable. In the first place, it is useful to have a summary of the discussion, given as briefly as possible. Otherwise, after a fairly long discussion, there will be many who go away confused by the divergent views they have heard, and likely to announce that the Parish Meeting only left them "more muddled than before". One of the beneficent activities of the Meeting may be to break down the too rigid, unexamined, entirely "all-black or all-white" conceptions that exist in the minds of many. It is equally true that the Meeting should help people to clarify their minds and stabilize their convictions. To

group of people who, as we have already said, have a very limited understanding of what they read in books, to plunge into the more difficult task of writing? It is this very fact, that most people get so little out of pamphlets, that emphasizes the importance of trying to write our own. It is a commonplace that we learn more from our own efforts than from those of others. What is needed then is simply the stimulus of someone who will propose the subject touching some aspect of our Christian life and invite those present to suggest their own ways of developing the theme. Group composition, for example, of a leaflet upon Baptism for use in the parish can be a more effective way of teaching or learning what we understand by Baptism than scores of sermons. Faced with the task of explaining something to friends and neighbours in language which they understand, and knowing so well what is commonly believed, most of us very soon discover how little we know of the subject, and how ill-prepared we are to give an account of our faith. These compositions, though they will never be literary successes, will nevertheless be of immense value in training the Parish Meeting to know what the Christian Church does stand for.

It may be objected at this point that there is considerable danger of the Parish Meeting becoming so engrossed in its own activities, so turned in upon itself, as to be quite arrogant in its judgement upon the work and life of the Christian Church as a whole. The danger is a real one, especially if in the course of public discussion those trained in the Parish Meeting discover themselves to be better equipped and better trained to hold their own. There is obviously a danger of becoming "superior" and even of talking as if the holding of a Parish Meeting made all the difference between profitable and unprofitable discipleship. There is a temptation to regard the home-made product as being without any doubt superior to anything that anyone else might

should it be taken for granted that the parish priest knows immediately how to perform this difficult task. They are there in the position of a learner like everyone else, and are just as likely to make mistakes. Indeed, a good deal of their background and training makes the position particularly difficult for them, accustomed as they are to preaching—the very last thing that is needed at the Meeting.

The steering of the Meeting is, even so, a different matter from the art of competent chairmanship, because the people have not come together primarily to transact business. They are gathered together as fellow-Christians, and the primary job of the Meeting is two-fold like this title. It must bring out as clearly as possible what being "fellows" means and what this relationship to Christ implies. In this sense, the job of the Meeting is to enable Christians to discover something more of the truth about themselves, to find a more real meaning and a deeper content in the phrases that they have heard so often. That is why each Meeting, however confused it may become, has something Pentecostal about it. The Biblical foundation should never be forgotten. "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard it."

There can be no question then of allowing a contemptuous dismissal of the Meeting as "just talk", because it does not set out to follow the usual lines of a business meeting, or to carry decisions by votes, or to draw up its conclusions in a series of neat "findings". There may be something much more honest and edifying in arriving at a confession of ignorance, bafflement, and something like humiliation, felt by all those present, and not least by the parish priest themselves. Put very simply, their job is to get people to talk, to overcome those barriers of shyness and reserve, to be natural and honest and unaffected with each other. In talking of almost anything connected with religion this is far

more difficult for most people than it sounds. Here apparently more than anywhere else we are determined to “keep up appearances” and to talk vaguely and as generally as possible lest we should give ourselves away. The fact that someone with a good deal of courage shows us how it can be done and bravely goes ahead in an honest declaration does not by any means win the unqualified approval of others. It has indeed been known that such honesty has been taken as something like a personal affront. But difficult though it may be to attain this ideal, we must go on believing that it is worth seeking.

Simply to get people to talk is plainly not enough, for we must do our talking with a difference. It is not enough to remember that everyone must be kept in mind; our talking must also have direction. It must be talking, not to a fixed point known to the parish priest beforehand, as would be the case with a teacher and a junior class, but to a point in the unknown. The Meeting is a meeting of disciples, assembled to learn what is the mind of the Spirit, a meeting of pilgrims summoned to set out like Abraham “not knowing whither he went”. Such ventures have obvious disadvantages, so that it is not at all surprising that many priests and people with some slight experience of what happens hastily return to the beaten tracks and the more familiar landmarks. Equally it is not surprising to hear from others that they had sleepless nights after the Meeting thinking over what had been said. This last remark, which points to real excitement of mind and spirit, is not so trivial as it sounds. A spark has been kindled into a flame.

What happens if people will not talk? What do you do if one person tends to monopolize the talking? In the first place we must recognize that we are doing something novel to the majority of our church-going people to-day. We have only to face this fact to realize what an indictment of our methods and what a

best of these things and put them on a bookstall in church, the job of the parish priest is to make selective use of them, in the Parish Meeting, to encourage the reading and *criticism* of them, bearing in mind that the majority of people have not begun to know what “adult” education means, in secular as well as religious matters. There is an enormous leeway to make up. At this point our main job is to find out how to make the best use of the material. Experience shows that well-intentioned reading aloud of pamphlets is one of the surest ways of killing interest. Few pamphlets and fewer books will stand this test, and this is not the way to use them. It is necessary that the parish priest should do a certain amount of pre-digestion, learning as they go along how to transpose the written into the spoken word, to adapt the writer’s logical development of their theme into questions, and to acquire the art of vividly summarizing the whole. Does this sound as if it makes things too easy for the rank and file, too burdensome for the leader? Actually it is but part of the necessary preparation that any teacher must make for their job, and in this realm of adult education we are only just at the beginning of a quite tremendous project. Few people in our congregations follow the line of argument or even see the full force of illustrations in the written language of books and pamphlets. It is not that they are less shrewd and intelligent than the writers; but they think in a different way, and only rarely do they find a booklet written in their way. A useful way of testing this is to set the Parish Meeting to write its own leaflets and to compare them with the more professional efforts. Certainly it will convince the Parish priest that he or she needs to be very sparing indeed of extensive reading aloud from even the liveliest and most informative pamphlet.

To mention the writing of leaflets by the Parish Meeting is to embark upon another sphere of activity. The suggestion may strike the reader as absurd. How can we expect, for example, a

Or again we recognize that the country as a whole is riddled with and perplexed by the habit of pilfering. Almost every worker can give evidence of what is going on. Men and women are taking home with them, with no great moral concern, whatever they can safely smuggle out of the works. Railway carriages are daily being stripped of electric light bulbs. What is the remedy? One worker present suggests that the management should make it known that they are ready to sell at cost price to the workers the articles they make, which vary from sandpaper to table-knives. Is that a reasonable, if limited suggestion? Another tries to go deeper into the causes of pilfering, knows what the pilferers themselves say about it, and puts his finger on Army life and habits of "scrounging". Another goes back to the question of the home. It hardly needs saying that we do not arrive easily at conclusions, for part of the value of this background of mixed experience is that it drives us away from too slick an estimate of the nature of the trouble. But what we do arrive at is bedded deeply in actual living.

A period of two hours a week is an extremely short time in which to face the questions that such problems raise. Meetings over several months may well be occupied with them. But other things, equally important, are demanding attention.

Almost every week the alert parish priest sees pamphlets, letters, and books which concern our Christian life. It is probable that in most parishes the priest is the only person who does see them. Unless he or she brings them before the Parish Meeting, they will never be known to any of the parishioners. The ordinary man or woman has no clue to their importance and no standard of judgement about them. How often, for example does the parish priest find in the course of visiting that pamphlets hawked from door to door have been bought because they appeared to be "good", but chiefly because the buyer had no possible background of judgement. Knowing that it is not enough simply to select the

formidable handicap to our work it is. Even to-day, after years of Summer Schools, Parochial Conventions, Missions, and the like, the majority of the people in our congregations are not accustomed to talk naturally about the Christian faith. It is true that there are arguments in the works, in the railway carriage, in the office, on religious matters, but it is noticeable that, apart from the intervention of some enthusiast, the discussion is carried on on an impersonal level. What nobody wants is the unpleasantness of getting "personal".

Consequently we must recognize that the awkward silence which so frequently overtakes a Parish Meeting in its earliest years is an indication both of our lack of training and of our ignorance. There is no easy answer to the problem. One parish priest who endeavoured to correct this by announcing that instead of a sermon there would be a discussion in church the following Sunday night, found the church empty, and later overheard the remark that "he was paid to preach". Others have struggled with the most difficult art of coaxing into life the beginnings of discussion over many months, and found that in spite of everything they tried a stodgy silence descended.

It is at this point that many have recourse to the practice of having a speaker. It is not unknown that some parish priests have worked out for a year ahead a rota of speakers and have printed a card to indicate their subjects. For many this plan has the obvious advantage of giving discussions a foundation of information and something to talk about. But the advantages are likely to be bought at too great a price. Valuable as it may be to stimulate discussion, and important as it is that we should hear the views of worthwhile speakers, it is likely to be disastrous if this becomes the usual procedure of the Parish Meeting. It is not too much to say that speakers should be asked to come in proportion to our strength and not our weakness in discussion. For it is true of both

priest and people that when we are listening to a speaker, we are, with the exception of a few experienced listeners, more passive than we should otherwise be. To put it crudely, speakers are popular because they make it easier. We tend to sit back where otherwise we should be called upon to be wrestling.

In the long run therefore, whatever the immediate advantages of listening to a speaker, our job is something that we cannot leave to anyone else. Speakers can help us with information, with the stimulus of personal contact, with the honesty of their approach to their subjects, but our job remains when they have come and gone. Our growing together in common understanding and common acceptance of responsibility still turns upon our willingness to disclose our minds to each other in sincerity and truth. It is for this reason that hours spent in saying and listening to the most commonplace remarks and the most trite observations are never wasted, provided that we do not let them pass unexamined and provided that we wrestle with them. It is the job of the parish priest to ensure that this wrestling goes on. It will not happen if, in the earlier stages, the priest shows signs of impatience with those who seem able only to contribute platitudes. What matters is that he or she should be able and ready to sift the grain and chaff, taking infinite trouble to do so, and to see that the grain is examined and re-examined by those present at the Meeting. They may read more into what is volunteered by someone than that person dreamt of. Nevertheless it is the priest's job to encourage the timid and reserved to make their contribution, and themselves to realize that nothing is so encouraging as the knowledge that our halting contribution, so diffidently offered, was genuinely welcomed and used. A personal knowledge of the people who attend the Meeting must be the guide in deciding whether the encouragement of some particular person shall take the form of a direct question: "What do you think about that,

Is your congregation taking its share of the common responsibility?

To such questions as these we can come back repeatedly through the years, finding new stimulus in them.

From these we pass to the consideration of points raised by people in the Meeting. The workers in offices, shops, and factories, the people in homes, shopping queues, and social contacts, are daily encountering the moral and spiritual problems of our time. What should they do? What should they say? We expect them to bear witness to their faith in these loneliest positions. It is right and proper that we should be ready to take immense pains to equip them for this task. But do we do this? Do we do it in particular ways and in respect of particular problems? It is precisely because the parish priest can never go into so many of these sections of the battle that he must call upon the laity, who do, to make known the problems that are to be faced. It is in facing these, not in moral generalizations, that we fight our battles. It is in the day-to-day encounter and in the language of the people that the replies must be made. No one can help better than the assembled Church, and time is never wasted if we can face real problems in this way and encourage people to bring them forward. One or two examples may be quoted. One member present is engaged in welfare work in a large industrial plant, where large numbers of cases occur of fragments of steel getting into the eyes of the workers. To remove these with the care that a proper estimation of the value of eyesight demands may mean the loss of considerable time off work. The management is bent upon production, the worker may have been grossly neglectful of safety precautions, eyesight is a God-given treasure and responsibility—to what standard then is the welfare worker to pay regard? Even to talk over these problems in the mixed gathering of the Parish Meeting is a great gain.

majority of people or reach them in a distorted fashion through the Press. Valuable reporting-back is a difficult art to acquire, but training and experience in it is something that the Parish Meeting should be giving to its members. Only by such a fostering of alert participation in the wider affairs of Church and State can the local Church be freed from the merited gibe of "parochialism", and can its members begin to see what it means to uphold Christian convictions in the different contexts of modern life.

These items passed, there are many more to consider. It helps to have definite questions bearing on Christian life and work. Some examples of questions addressed by the Bishop of Sheffield to the parishes of his diocese may be given:

What kind of a community should a Christian Church be, and what should be its aim and mission in your town and parish during the next five years?

In what ways can this mission be made the corporate responsibility of laity as well as of clergy, in which each must share and all act together?

What more do you think should be done than is being done through worship, teaching, evangelism, and parochial activities, to make Christ the accepted Lord and Master of one and all, and to proclaim his Gospel?

What additional resources in clergy, workers, and equipment are needed? What are you doing to seek out likely leaders and to train them?

What changes in worship and in times of worship, in the provision of teaching and in other ways are necessary?

How do you see the relation between the Church in your parish and its task in the diocese, the nation, and the world?

Jack?" or whether we throw out the questions generally and catch the first reply.

Still more will turn upon the attitude of the parish priest as leader. In view of what has been said of the character of the Meeting, it is plainly not their function to give the impression that they think they know all the answers, or that this is a glorious opportunity for delivering a lecture. The priest's steering, their interrogation, and their sifting must all be done as by a member of the Body and not as by one set over it. The atmosphere of the family and the completely informal approach to the whole business of the Meeting must go hand in hand with an obvious desire to learn and a willingness to act upon what is agreed.

This last point is mentioned here because it has a great bearing upon the question of the survival and growth of the Parish Meeting. It raises the whole problem of what participation in the Meeting is going to mean. We are asking people to regard it with the utmost seriousness and to come into it as whole-heartedly as possible, to drop a good many of the usual barriers of social small-talk, and to speak honestly of the things that concern them most. Seriousness does not mean severity and gloom, but it does mean a recognition of the fact that we are not talking for talking's sake. Quite quickly the people present will ask themselves whether the parish priest who has called the Meeting as an assembly of the Church, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Spirit, does really mean what she or he said about it. Do they, for example, take seriously what is said there, do they think over it, as they expect the parishioners to think over what the priest has said? Does he or she intend that the Church should act upon what is decided, or do they go their own way when all has been said? The complaint has been made already many times: "He says that he wants to hear what we think, but he never acts upon it; we might just as well have held our tongues." Actually the outcome of this

kind of thing is even worse. People rightly resent being called upon to do something which is costly to the sensitive-minded unless they can be assured that it is rightly valued. They are quick to detect a note of superficiality and humbug.

*“Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day
And make me travel forth without my cloak?”*

It is not too much to say that the position of the parish priest in this respect is vital to the right understanding of what the Parish Meeting stands for. Humanly speaking, everything turns upon their integrity and sensitiveness. They can help the Meeting to go forward to hitherto quite undreamt of levels of understanding, spiritual insight, and adventurous courage, changing the whole outlook and will of the Church, or they can fritter away the time, the resources, and the confidence of the people. One of the earliest signs of what is happening will be found in the way in which people respond to this opportunity to speak. There is a world of difference between the silence of those who are thinking and the silence of those who are merely waiting for someone to say something.

3. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

“What do you find to talk about?” The question is so often asked by those inquiring about the Parish Meeting that something must be said about it here. It is, of course, a little astonishing in view of our admitted concern for the whole of human life to find that ordinary church-going people should doubt whether we can find enough to talk about. Our real difficulty is to find the time to face half the things that are there to be discussed. There are, as Uncle Pumblechook remarked, “Plenty of subjects going about, for them that know how to put salt on their tails.” How then is the agenda to be put together?

discussed this thoroughly in our Church”! Two illustrations of the importance of this kind of preparation may be given. In one case a Government official was explaining the reasons for a decision which affected the whole life of the nation. It was a large meeting, but when question time came no less than a dozen Christian people, men and women, were ready to ask valuable and searching questions which had been prepared carefully in the Parish Meeting the week before and which made the public meeting more than a random battle. It is not too much to say that if the Christian Church took seriously this preparation of its members, to help them to have “a right judgement in all things”, the nation’s public opinion would be vastly changed. As it is, the Christian is rarely heard and is rarely expected to have thought out his or her attitude to problems other than gambling, divorce, and Sunday games.

In the other case, the meeting was arranged by a Deanery Missionary Council with a speaker returned from India. After his address had been given, the questioning by those who had spent some time preparing for the meeting so impressed the speaker that he exclaimed: “Had I known that you would have come prepared to ask such questions, I would have cut my talk and dealt with them at once. Why don’t more people do this?” We cannot but admit that much time and energy is wasted in public meetings of the Church because we cannot assume that those who attend have come with any reasonable preparation. Where a Parish Meeting has done its work, it is undeniable that its members stand out in the gatherings they attend as alert listeners and active participants in the discussion, simply because they have gone equipped.

In the same way there will be opportunity in the Parish Meeting to report on what has happened, for here again it is notorious that many valuable discussions either never reach the

power of the relationships set up in the Meeting. One of the problems of evangelism is the absence of this evidential fellowship in the life of the local Church into which the newcomer may be brought. Certainly the Parish Meeting meets that need. But our contention goes much further. The Meeting is itself the strongest and most effective "sign" we have. Of this we are ever ready to say, "Come and see."

With this in mind, we pass to the actual conduct of the Meeting. What happens? About 7, 7.30, or 8 p.m., according to the habits of the district, people begin to arrive in twos and threes and meet each other in the atmosphere of a home. There are no ranks of chairs arranged to face a platform; instead are the indications that we are gathering round a fireside. Cups of tea and an occasional sandwich or cake will help to make each member feel at home and able to help. Here too are the opportunities and the responsibilities of seeing that new-comers are welcomed and talked with and introduced. How much depends upon that kind of readiness to take such trouble, a multitude of people who have come into and gone out of our churches will bear witness. It is so easy to be friendly with our friends. "But why is it," wrote one Christian, "that the first six months in a new parish can be the loneliest time of one's life?"

When it is time to begin the discussion (the Meeting has begun as soon as people were arriving), the parish priest from somewhere in the middle of the gathering may ask for attention to the things the Meeting has to do. Some notices of forthcoming events may lead at once into the question of preparation for them, and this is one of our most important jobs. We spend a good deal of time attending meetings of various kinds, yet how little time is spent in equipping the members of the Church with the knowledge, outlook, criticisms, and requirements of the Church! How rarely can the speaker at such meetings say, "We have

The answer is simply that we must let it be formed by actual experience. It must grow out of what is facing the Church internally and externally on every front. This means that there is no aspect of the Christian life, no problem that faces the Church, no project or campaign that we are asked to undertake, that should not be discussed at the Parish Meeting. In so far as the Church is alive and active, the Meeting is the clearing-house of its activities; in so far as it is trying to ground itself in the deep things of God, the Meeting is the solemn assembly where inquiry and wrestling go on. It rests with the parish priest to see that all aspects are kept in view. Let us take for example two actual agenda papers of a Parish Meeting.

A

1. Half-hour discussion on the work of William Temple, using Canon A. E. Baker's Pelican book as material.
2. Half-hour discussion on recent talks given by the Bishop of the diocese on Christian Morality.
3. Reading of a short article from the Diocesan Review on the situation in China.
4. Planning of the approaching Whitsuntide procession through the parish in which members of the Church were to portray the contribution of the Christian Church to the life of Britain.

(This last item covered many weeks and involved drawing up a programme, a leaflet for distribution in the streets, and a good deal of fact-finding about the life of the Church.)

B

1. Reading of a letter from a priest working in Trinidad.
2. Report of a recent visit of one of the Church members to a

group of small country parishes, leading to discussion of the special problems involved.

3. Preparations for the monthly Parish breakfast (a routine matter).
4. Lengthy discussion of the annual report of the National Council for Civil Liberties, with special attention to the position of the B.B.C., the state of the law affecting mental defectives, and questions of freedom of speech.
5. Whitsuntide procession, further arrangements and assignment of jobs.

These brief notes of what was actually done on two consecutive Wednesdays, recorded in the log-book, suffice at this stage to show how parochial affairs and local business are handled along with the world-wide affairs of the Church and the problems of our common life. It is surely important that members of the Church should be helped to overcome the narrow departmentalism which plays havoc with our witness and to grow in informed concern for all these different aspects of the common life. It is equally important to emphasize at this point that a composite agenda in which different ranges of experience are touched upon is valuable in helping to bring into the activity of the Meeting all kinds of people who otherwise might sit silent. Just because the Parish Meeting is meant to include all ages and all types of people, we must recognize the need to vary the topics, even when a few enthusiasts are keenly developing their particular subject. We must learn to talk in such a way as to bring all kinds of people into the field of talk, to be able and ready to give the right kind of illustrations which will help the others to follow. Once again it rests with the parish priest to notice the trend of the Meeting and to be ready to pass from one item to another when the "feel" of the conversation requires it, not by an

One other comment may be made which concerns town and country alike. At some stage in the ebb from Church-going and Church-membership, we meet the man or woman who is inquiring about the Christian Faith. To what do we direct them? Where may we assure them that they will meet the Christian Church? It is the conviction of those who have known the Parish Meeting for any length of time that it is to this Meeting that we should ask them to come. Let them come for months, if need be, before services are ever suggested. Let them be encouraged to be as critical as possible, let them be as searching as possible of the quality of the Meeting, remembering the remark in the Report *Towards the Conversion of England*, that "the ultimate evidence for the credibility of the Gospel must be a quality of life manifested in the Church which the world cannot find elsewhere". There have been those already who have said that they could see the value of the Meeting but not of services, and it may well be that for a long time we shall get no further than this. But how great a thing this is! Because there are people who are not ready to "make Eucharist" with us, we must not lose sight of the immense area of the common life in which we can enter into the mystical union. The recovery of the corporate Christian life is actually taking place when the twos and threes discover a reality in the Meeting which they cannot now find in the services. Only here can the prejudices and misconceptions and misgivings about the Church, which are widespread and deeply entrenched, be freely raised and frankly dealt with.

It is for this reason that in discussions upon evangelism we constantly return to the experience of the Parish Meeting. "We testify to that we have seen." Over a number of years new people have steadily come in and taken an active part in the learning and working life of the Body, have become new people in outlook and concern, have become witnesses in themselves to the converting

actual running of the Meeting should not be capable of almost infinite adaptation to meet local needs. If we argue that no two parishes are alike, we can be just as ready to affirm that no two Parish Meetings need be alike. Indeed a great part of our present purpose is to suggest that groups of Christians should come together in their different parishes and set to work to find out what is the shape and nature of the Church in that place, without any requirement that it should conform to a pre-determined pattern. Nevertheless it can help the others to hear about what has already happened in the attempts that have been made.

In the first place, it should be made clear that Parish Meetings have been working in all kinds of different parishes. The writer has joined in the work of such a Meeting for two years in a Cathedral city, for five years in an unemployed mining village, and for nine years in an artisan parish in Sheffield, and has been present at Meetings in tiny villages, colliery towns, residential suburbs, and in the heart of London, covering something like thirty parishes. A great many more parishes have developed their Meetings of which we have no first-hand knowledge. The outstanding fact is that the Meeting has been adapted to meet all these different needs.

No doubt we are made more conscious of certain problems in the smaller country parishes by the fact that only a few people may come together. The proportion to the local population and to the Church-going population may actually be higher than it is in the big town parish, but the fact that perhaps no more than two or three people come along does present us with special problems which must be faced. They will not be faced without a high conviction that the recreation and rediscovery of the nature of the Church by two or three is infinitely worth while, and without the patience and the courage to sustain the effort.

obviously arbitrary closure, but by inviting attention to other aspects.

One of the commonest things to occur at the first few Meetings, whatever the declared agenda, will be the “grousing” and airing of grievances. There are few parish churches in the heart of whose life there do not exist unresolved problems and long-standing difficulties, which are rehearsed frequently enough in conversation but never faced by the Church. It is here that we touch upon one of the most important functions of the Parish Meeting. To speak of it as a safety-valve is to do less than justice to it, for we are concerned with human and not with mechanical affairs. What more important thing for the health and soundness of the Body could there be than the opportunity to bring these problems to light and patiently to unravel them in an atmosphere of Christian concern? It does not follow that the aggrieved will necessarily be satisfied, but it is likely that after one or two repetitions in public of the ancient grievance the sting of rancour is removed and openness creates a healthier attitude towards it. It is important, then, that there should be no attempt to clamp down upon this feature, which can loom so large in the earliest experiences of the Meeting.

Equally important and troublesome is the feature noticed earlier, when two or three people tend to do all the talking, quite often upon narrow issues. There are those who apparently cannot endure a momentary silence, and must for ever be talking. No sooner is a subject for discussion announced than they rush in with a handful of newspaper *clichés*. There can be no question of silencing such people or dealing abruptly with rather trivial remarks. They must be heard, and heard with sympathy, until it is reasonably clear that they have had their opportunity, and that the Meeting means to go further. The more good-humoured the breaking in upon their garrulity can be made the better. Indeed it

is important that quite steadily through the growing life of the Parish Meeting, occupied as it is with the most profound and sacred matters as well as the most troublesome of our problems, we should learn to laugh together and develop the gaiety of spirit of a good family. There is no better corrective to the faults of the garrulous and the conceited, the cynical and the over-pious, than the good-humoured laughter and interjections of the other members of the family. This can only be achieved if from the beginning we avoid set speeches, refrain from standing to address the meeting, and refuse to develop a heavy formality about procedure. Most Church discussions still contain far too much pomposity, and the Parish Meeting has a good deal to do by way of deflating it.

At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the problem of strained relations, quarrels, and open antagonisms. The more strongly we feel about our cause and the more vigorously we act upon our beliefs, the more certain we are to offend others. The more closely we are knit together in this Christian community the more keenly we can be hurt and hurtful to each other. It would be absurd to suggest that simply because we held a Parish Meeting we could root out all these problems. Indeed, the Parish Meeting would seem at certain times to be positively productive of such troubles. But the gain from the Meeting is a very real one. The important thing is that the tensions that arise should be known and dealt with by the whole body of the Church, not as extraordinary affairs, but as part of the workaday life of a family.

One other feature of the practical working of the Meeting may be mentioned here. In meetings of Church people discussions are carried on far too frequently in "ideal" terms. Speaker after speaker will talk eloquently of what might be done, of good suggestions we might entertain, of Faith and Power and Sacrifice in vague and hopeful ways. Discussions are held on

which there are all too rarely investigations to discover what has been done. How often, for example, do we check the results of an evangelistic campaign? How much do we know of the outcome of the Report *Towards the Conversion of England*? It is, in consequence, one of the weightiest duties of the parish priest to see that the Parish Meeting is delivered from this snare. It can be done if, in each discussion where proposals are made, the Meeting is trained to be severely practical in examining them and to realize that what is said about the Church is being said about the body actually assembled. There will be much less said in terms of the Bride of Christ, and much more in terms of household duties. Although we have emphasized the fact that the importance of the Parish Meeting does not depend so much upon the making of plans as upon the communion of spirit and understanding gained, when plans are being made the Meeting should be more and not less practical than so many meetings, just because it realizes its calling to be the Church. There is no need to take votes. It is far better to work upon the "sense of the Meeting", and make it quite clear that the utmost importance is attached to common action.

4. PRACTICAL DETAILS

Does the Parish Meeting "take" in town and country parishes alike? The question is of great importance for many reasons. We need constantly to be reminded that the problems of the great multitude of thinly-populated parishes are not less exacting than those of the towns. We need to be able to deal with the remark that, while the Parish Meeting may be very good and helpful for some parishes, "it wouldn't work with us". Leaving aside for the time being the question of "helpfulness", it should be clear from what has been said already that since informality and flexibility are two of its most necessary features, there is no reason why the