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Mathews: Local churches must offer their lives

Joseph Wesley Mathews is an intense man. When Mathews, dean of the Ecumenical Institute decides to leave the institute's Chicago-based ghetto and church renewal activity to come for four days to secluded, quiet Lake Poinsett near Arlington, S. D., to address 200 Dakota Methodist and EUB pastors, he is aware of the "no's" he has said to say this one "yes."

Devotions are given in the crowded meeting room of the Methodist Camp, introductions are made and hymns are sung. The pastors are unfamiliar to Mathews, but they're not strangers. He is one of them—as former pulpit minister, theology instructor and World War II chaplain.

Mathews' turn comes. He faces his audience in black shirt and black slacks. EI uses black clothing symbolically as they move among the ghetto's black people giving them pride in their color.

He ignores the rostrum and the microphone. He begins softly.

"My confreres of the cruciformed life and all others present—we are so poverty stricken in our understanding of symbols and even more so in our capacity to use them that one is at a loss to know how to relate and mark you well you and I are highly skilled in the psychological nonsense that has to do with relationships but we know little about relating in the spirit dimension. And here without the mediation of symbols there is no relationship. Then what shall we do? Shall we try again the ancient formulae of the church? Is it possible that they once again shall live, I mean with power—the kind of power that rips and tears and sears the interior deeps of your spirit and upside-downs you and leaves you other than who you are?

"I shall try.

"Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ. And all those assembled there said 'Amen.' "

"Amen."

"A few, there, meekly said 'amen'. It's obvious the symbols have no meaning anymore. I don't mean the kind of meaning little old ladies of one sex or another—you know what I mean—try to conjure up at 11 o'clock on Sunday morning until any self-respecting layman can hardly anymore go. I don't mean that. I mean the kind of power

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that sears and scars and tears the inner deeps of your spirit and upside-downs you and leaves you other than you are. But I am not an easily discouraged man. I shall try once again. "Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ. And all those assembled there said 'Amen.'"

"Amen."

"Maybe—perhaps—one day. . . .

"I have been asked to talk on the mission of the church. You are aware if you have any degree of sensitivity that no one can talk on that subject today for to talk on the mission of the church today you must talk on the subject of the church in mission. Do you understand that? And that's because the God who wroughts mighty wroughts has wrought an extra mighty wrought in our time and this is what we call the renewal of the church. And I'm sure if you did not know otherwise, the introduction would have told you that I represent the forces of radical renewal within the church in our time. I'm an unabashed revolutionary. And I mean an unabashed revolutionary. I am out to see the church utterly different. Over my dead body will she not be utterly different than when she gave me birth."

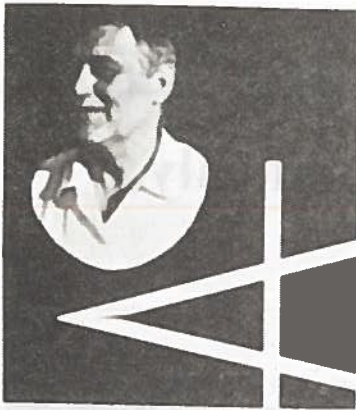
Mathews calls himself a fanatic on church renewal—"I mean I can't stand people who hate the church. There are two kinds of them. There are those who know that faith in God has said 'no' to the present historical manifestation of the church and get out. I have no respect for them unless they are busy bringing in the new historical manifestation of the church. Now, I do not agree with them but I do have respect for them. The others, those I have even less respect for, are those who stay in the church and do nothing to enable the church to be radically obedient under the new acts of God within the 20th century.

"Here, my brother clergymen, you and I, those of us that are still here, need to be doing some deep, hard, searching. If you in your way are not working for the renewal of the church I am accusing you of being a hater of the church.

"I am a structural revolutionary, in that I believe the church is redeemable from within and mark you when it's altered it's not going to look like the church you grew up in.

"Now you grasp that this is the fiftieth year of the radical renewal of the church." It began in 1917,

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JOSEPH W. MATHEWS — "Whenever you have this goingness (diagrammed at the Ecumenical Institute with this symbol) you always have a body of people who move out into the twilight zone between the no longer and the not yet and there lay down their lives on behalf of the masses of mankind."

he said, with Karl Barth, and for forty years was concerned with theoretical renewal. This accomplished, the last ten years dealt with the practical revolution. Looking pastors sitting in the front rows straight in the eyes, he continues.

"You ought to be squirming in your seats, for fundamentally, the practical revolution can only be carried out in the local congregation, the local congregation, the local congregation. . . . No bishop is going to bring about any revolution. He's a part of the bureaucratic structures and by definition, the bureaucratic structures have to supply what the front lines demand. And until the front lines demand mortar shells and machine guns they're not very well going to get machine guns. Do you understand that? If you're waiting for some bishop

'If you, in your own way, are not working for the renewal of the church, I am accusing you of being a hater of the church.'

to come and do the revolution for you hell's going to be frozen over and still you're not going to get anything. He cannot do it. It's the man in the local congregation."

A few years ago the seminaries were the exciting places to be, he said. "Now you go back and they're as dead as dodo birds." You need to do some yelling and shouting on that score, he said. "Now, the exciting place, the front line in the revolution, is the local congregation, the local congregation. . . ."

"I think this is really the reason men are leaving the clergy like flies and I mean they're leaving it—every bishop has his drawerful. And there are many ways, of course, of leaving the ministry other than selling bonds. The number of women cases and alcoholism. . . ."

"But you know I suspect that. . . there's a twist to this. Many men have been hiding in the ministry where there was nothing going on. And a lazy man likes to be where nothing is going on. But a lazy man is able to smell the brand new kinds of demands."

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Mathews said when it means coming onto "machine gun nests with your belly sticking out" some are going to want out now. It's up to modern man, he said, "to reforge the gospel in such a way that people's lives are changed. Only then is the church renewed. And as you can see you are going to be the hero. Very likely a dead one. I mean this—for one of the parodies today is that to be a man of faith is to be a dead man. That is why, I hope, some of you and I'm sure it couldn't be all of you in this many clergy, are my confreres of cruciformity. You're going to be dead ones and I'd like to suggest that maybe once again the joy where there is no joy that defines the Christian life just may be yours. It's been a long time since your prayers really meant anything to you and you know damnably well that what I'm saying is true. It's been a long time since there was any powerful sense of relationship to God in your life. These hymns, sentimental hymns you sing and try to drum up some kind of enthusiasm—they leave you the dead men you are down inside. We're trapped. But as we walk into the machine gun nests, who knows but there may be a new outpouring of the spirit, a sense of immediacy of our relationship to God."

Mathews later stressed two points briefly mentioned in this introduction. He described what he means by relationship to God, in a discussion group.

"You begin with a situation and then you have to ask yourself whether in that situation you are going to be in God relationship. That is to pick up that situation as a gift and forge the not yet. God is a relational category. Therefore, we always deal with the present. And when you say 'God caused this' you are speaking poetically or mythologically.

Mathews also delved into the "man of faith is a dead man"—the Christ event—matter in a later lecture.

"When we describe what you and I call a Christ event, we almost have to be statistical because it happens to you—or it happens to you—or it happens to me. Now let me see if I can statistically describe it out of the place of blood in my own existence. And I have to begin with my wife being the wrath of God on me—and I mean she is the wrath

...when you say 'God caused this' you are speaking poetically...

of God on me. She knows where my gizzard is—that is the illusion making faculty in me....

"All of you sentimentalizing marriage here this afternoon. My heavens to live that close to another human being who knows where your gizzard is—why you would think all of us are insane. I say she is the wrath of God on me. She not only knows where my gizzard is but she is continually puncturing it. I try to reduce her into some kind of a cockroach but she refuses to finally be squelched into a nut or a bolt and that means she is the wrath of God.

"I remember when I was teaching seminary I used to bring students out to the house and one evening I had a group and I was scintillating all over; you know I can really scintillate when I try, and that evening I really scintillated. And in the midst of it Lyn gets up 'Joseph, I'll see you in the kitchen.' When they say 'I'll see you in the kitchen' you might as well go. For women have a way and they've had it since cave men days and they still exercise it and sooner or later you go to the kitchen. And so I get up and bumble out some kind of an embarrassed excuse and start going to the kitchen. But don't think I'm naive. I don't go to that kitchen empty handed, my sixguns are out—I mean they're out. Well, mark you, if you don't

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kill em, I mean before they have a chance—then you're a dead duck.

"When somebody threatens you, and mark you they have never threatened you save they have touched one of your illusions, do you understand that—if you threaten me, you know right at that moment you've got ahold of one of my hiding places. Some of this assinine psychology, you know, where you make a gentlemen's agreement you'll not threaten each other, no, no, no—I mean when you've got me defensive you're on to one

of my hiding places. And when somebody threatens you you've got to destroy them.... And we pious people, we're the most skilled in murder.... Anyway, I go with my six guns out and I figure the best way to start out is on the offensive. 'I don't care what I did, you can't embarrass me in front of my students. Do you know that tomorrow morning I've got to stand up in front of that class and lecture in front of those students? What do you mean humiliating me?'

"Joseph'.

"So I have to start out with another approach; 'Look here, Lyn, if you just want to get mean about this, I know things about you'—that usually swings them a little bit—

"Joseph, you misused a young boy in there'....



"Well, sometimes in the midst of the everydayness of life, and those of you who think that you have ever met God outside of the everyday on-goingness of life are self-deceiving. You're not talking about God, you're talking about some kind of Santa Claus. Sometimes in the midst of the everyday goingnesses of life in which you and I are called into concrete question, you are hurled out to the very limits of your existence where you come face to face with your radical contingency. That is to say your awareness that one day you just showed up and one day you just showed not up.... Thus far nobody has beat the wrath of death, just period.

"You extract yourself as a contingent—as a dread-filled being. And all of this bourgeois psychology that attempts to overcome the anxiety becomes nonsense. To be human is to be utterly anxious.... You try to get rid of that dread so you build a phony universe around you, a universe that is secure, that has no dread in it....

"Now the eschatological hero, the Christ figure, he's a strange one—the cosmic figure, if you

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please—that comes and just bumps your universe. . . . Only I think he has a hatpin that he sticks in this illusion and it goes 'pshshshsh'—and you know what? This gives you back the actuality of your humanness with all of your dread. Therefore the Christ happening does not add one confounded thing—not one—it just delivers you back to the actualities of your own existence that God gave you without the illusions.

"When I experience myself in my utter contingency I experience the givenness of the world as it is. I mean the just thereness of the way things are. . . with all the tragedy, with all the horror, with all the brutality. . . . Finally, when you are shoved to the edge of this life, you've either got to say 'yes' to this world or 'no' to it. . . . The Christ Word is a great 'YEA' over this world. . . . And then you take this spacial metaphor and you push it way down into your interior being and

'Those of you who think you've ever met God outside of the everyday ongoingness of life are self-deceiving.'

the Christ Word in this metaphor is 'all is accepted.' Do you understand that? The only Joseph Wesley Mathews I know anything about or you know anything about is utterly received in this universe. . . . Whether my mother likes me, whether my wife approves of me, whether my children like me — whether you like me or not, I want you to understand the givenness of my being before you in the fantastic witness to the fact that Joseph Wesley Mathews and all that constitutes him has the seal of God."

The Christ Word for the past, he said, is "all that ever was is approved. . . . Every bit of suffering that has ever taken place in this world is that without which you are not who you are now.

"Marilyn Monroe stood among the great Protestant theologians at least in one instance—when she married brother Miller, the press was talking to her and they said 'Miss Monroe, if you had your life to live over again would you live it the same
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way?' And she said her answer was both 'no' and 'yes.' She said 'On the one hand, if you've done what I have done, the terrible things I've suffered, the terrible things, you'd have to say 'no', you wouldn't live it. But on the other hand, if what



has happened to me and what I did is that without which this hour would not be here I would not change one iota of it.' Did you follow that? The Christ word is the unbelievable word that what has been is approved. And when you shove this into the future then all the future is open. . . .

"This is what irritates me with some of you when you say you are the victim, that you can't do this because of some little old lady in your church or because you married a shrew or because you didn't study hard in seminary or because you don't have as many gifts—I almost want to swear and say to HELL with that nonsense. The Word of Jesus Christ is that the future is open. Did you ever notice that the man who cannot accept his past is approved also cannot see the future is open?

"My past is approved, and because it is approved I can see that I don't have to be the slob I was yesterday and my congregation doesn't have to be the slob it was yesterday.

"When that Word strikes your life, when it seizes you, it is an offense."

Mathews points out that first it is an intellectual offense. The questions comes "Who says so?" It does no good, he said, to say Tillich or Luther say so—the worms eat Tillich as well as you and Luther didn't make it either.

"It is a question you have to answer."

And there is the emotional offense, he said, for "if you fool with that Word the rest of your life you

...you're utterly received as significant...

are emotionally vulnerable. You haven't got one ounce, the rest of your days, of any kind of protection before the world-given dread of humanness itself. I mean your life comes in on you as an anxious existence. You don't have anything wrapped up, ever again.

The third part of the seizure of the Word is to death, he said, and a part of death is doubt.

"Some people think we have to get rid of doubt. What are they talking about? You finally have to take the doubt of the whole world into your own guts, that's what it means. You don't go around it you go through it by taking it into your guts.

"The decision you make is whether or not this world is good and your life is utterly significant and your past is now accepted and that your future, you decide. No wonder we talked about this as death. For here I die to all my pretensions about myself—from all my hopes to escape from humanness, from all of my intentional pride to be by own god or to build my own world—I mean you die. And in theology today we are clear that to die is to live—not that I die and then I start to live. No. To die is to live. The cross and the empty tomb cannot be separated. It is not that anything is added to me. I'm just restored to myself.

Mathews tells of his father beating him for not shelling peas as fast as his brother—"do you not understand that I would not be who I am had that happening not happened? And do you not understand that I am my neurotic patterns and if you

'A fat old 55-year-old man might collapse in 5 minutes. I mean the future is that about which there is nothing known.'

take away my neurotic patterns you take away every unique, unrepeatable gift that Joseph Wesley Mathews has?

"Then there's the future. I haven't got the foggiest. A fat old 55-year-old man might collapse in five minutes. I mean the future is that about which there is nothing known. The only thing that you and I know about this word is that this word will always be there, do you understand? But that only. Now I like to be a two-legged man. Tomorrow I may show up a one-legged man. But that same Word will be there, saying 'the one-legged Joseph Mathews is utterly significant. He couldn't be any more and therefore he can live

his life to the fullest as a one-legged man.' Now I am a three-boyed man. But little boys, sometimes... This summer one of my boys was in an accident in which another boy lost his life. And you see I'm sort of a sentimentalist and I used to, in the middle of the night, wake up and think one of my three boys is dead and I used to get up out of bed and go to their room and listen until I heard three snores or breathing, then I'd go back. I don't see how I could live as a two-sonned man



but that Word would be there tomorrow if I were a two-sonned man saying 'Joseph you're utterly received as significant as a two-sonned man and you can pick up your two-sonnedness and live.'

"And then when the icy finger of death taps me on the shoulder, that Word shall be there saying 'the mystery of your death is the same as the mystery of your life. One is as received as the other, and you can pick up that mystery and embrace that mystery.'

"This is a universal happening... it is a radical happening. There's nothing pious about it, nothing religious about it, nothing Christian about it in any reduced concept of Christianity. It is the human happening.

"Finally, it is contentless. And here's where you're in trouble with your people. You've reduced this tremendous, transforming happening into some assinine set of doctrines you ask people to believe. No. The content of that happening comes out of the content of your life. You're not married to that woman I'm married to who knows my gizzard. You're not 55 years old. You didn't have my father. The content of the happening is in the concrete situation. Always.

"Here's the renewal of the church. Here's the transformation of life."

(This is the first of two articles on the pastors' conference. In the November issue will be Mathews' views on the perversions of the church and structures for renewal.)