



Toward The Establishment
of a
RELIGIOUS ORDER
for the
Post-Modern World

TOWARD THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A RELIGIOUS ORDER FOR THE POST-MODERN WORLD

RADICAL SERVANTS

The religious orders of the church historically have understood themselves to be the radical servants of the established church, obedient and under assignment to it. They have served as a catalyzing force within the historical church, dedicated to continual renewal so that the mission of the church in the world might be carried out effectively. At the same time, it has always been the historical church which has invested and authorized the orders, thereby deciding the direction of its own renewal and of its impact upon civilization itself.

CORPORATE STAFF

Within this tradition of religious orders of the church, the staff of the Ecumenical Institute has come to grasp itself as an experiment in being a twentieth century ecumenical order. The beginnings of the experiment may be traced back to 1952 in Austin, Texas, where people committed to the renewal of the church initiated the Christian Faith and Life Community. It began with an emphasis on the campus ministry but quickly broadened its thrust to include lay training, clergy consultations and the development of new methodologies for the church to be mission in the world. In 1962, seven families from this community accepted the invitation of The Church Federation of Greater Chicago to become the staff of the Ecumenical Institute, a research and training center created in response to a resolution of the World Council of Churches. Situating themselves in a black inner-city neighborhood on Chicago's West Side, the Institute staff began a major experiment in the methods of community reformulation.

**ECUMENICAL
ORDER**

During this twenty-year period, the corporate staff has continued to expand and focus its understanding of the role of the church in civilization and to experiment with ways of adequately structuring its common life in the face of the overwhelming tasks. As the design of this corporate life gradually emerged, the staff came to recognize that it was in fact profoundly engaged in experimenting with the dynamics of a religious order, one which was ecumenical, composed of family units, and in mission to the secular and global revolutions of the twentieth century, but which was also clearly a participant in the great tradition of the religious orders of the church.

**KEY
CHARACTERISTICS**

The corporate body is a conscious experiment in what the church has called the third or family order, and includes single persons, married couples, and families with children. It is ecumenical, including a wide-ranging representation of the rich traditions of historical Christianity. It is composed of laymen and clergymen. It is global, with a present network of fifty-nine religious houses spanning the world. It understands itself to be a religious order in a secular age, engaged in shaping the new forms of secular spirituality needed for post-modern man to recover the meaning of Christian vocation in every station of life.

**EXTERNAL
MISSION**

The order has embodied its understanding of the church as mission in the traditional arenas of teaching, service and contemplation. In its teaching role, it has developed religious and cultural curricula and pedagogical methodologies designed to awaken churchmen to the radical possibilities of faith and to equip them to participate creatively in shaping the times in which they live. The service aspect of the order may be seen in its current work with over a hundred Roman Catholic and Protestant local parishes and congregations through the Local Church Experiment, and in its research and demonstration projects in the area of social reformulation. The order's work in contemplation is designed to allow post-modern man to experience his own spirit deeps and is exemplified by new methodologies for the recovery of the Scriptures and for the contemporary articulation of such classical categories as meditation, contemplation, and prayer.

This external mission is enabled and sustained by a discipline of internal life. The key to the internal style of the community is its symbolic life. Daily corporate worship, rituals, experimental spiritual exercises, common time designs, and art-forms are distinctive features of the community's life. Regular corporate study creates a

**INTERNAL
LIFE**

common memory and allows the total body to participate in a common journey of consciousness. All time is understood to be assigned, and all decisions arise out of a polity based on a form of consensus-building which operates throughout the total order. The community is totally self-supporting, with stipends based on the size of order families and allocated from the earnings provided by members assigned to work in secular occupations. In these ways, the internal life style of the community seeks to embody and manifest the objectives of its external missional thrust.

**SPIRIT
MOVEMENT**

Throughout its twenty-year existence, the order has offered courses, constructed extended training programs and launched pilot projects to communicate and demonstrate the possibility of practical renewal in the local church and the local community. It has found itself increasingly the center of a growing movement of churchmen from across the globe who participate in the shaping of its methodologies and operate in a growing collegueship with the Ecumenical Institute. This body of colleagues assumed definite form in 1966 when it began to meet in annual council and adopted the name of the Spirit Movement. Today, perhaps 50,000 persons throughout the world see themselves as colleagues in the Spirit Movement, while the corporate body of the Institute itself has grown to include more than 1600 members drawn from every area of the globe.

**THREE
DYNAMICS**

As the corporate body moves into its second twenty-year phase, new clarity has arisen concerning its overall form and its internal dynamics. On the basis of the sociological manifestations already visible and of the demands which the future is making on the historical church, it has become apparent that three dynamically interrelated aspects of the order are present. They have been designated the symbolic order, the extended order and the movemental order.

**SYMBOLIC,
EXTENDED,
MOVEMENTAL**

While the three cannot be rigidly separated, since an individual may move from one aspect to another as the mission requires, the primary characteristics of each can be delineated. The symbolic order is the most visible form of the order, the gathered community of resident families who follow a common time design and operate out of the common symbolic life of the community. Approximately one-fourth of this body resides at a base house in Chicago, while the rest live in religious houses across the globe. The extended order consists of those whose dispersed but strategic vocational stations call for them to adapt themselves more fully to the schedules, structures, and life styles which correspond to such stations. At the

same time, they too understand themselves to be under total assignment as the order and subject to immediate reassignment should the mission require it. The movemental order includes that body of local churchmen grounded in particular geographical communities who embody the new religious style of vocational and family life within their congregations, their communities and their occupations. They participate fully in creating and enacting the strategies of the order's missional thrust and, to the extent possible, in the common life of the order.

FUTURE RELATIONSHIPS

Our age has seen the decline of the historic religious orders of the church. It has seen their numbers diminish and their missional purpose become obscured. But in the midst of this crisis, the order dynamic of historical Christianity is emerging in new forms, forms which embody the global ecumenism and secular spirituality to which the church is called in the post-modern world. The emerging form of the order dynamic raises anew the question of the relationship of a contemporary order to the established church: how will a global and ecumenical body of people formalize its loyalty and servanthood to the historical church? How will the established church, in its present denominational richness, invest and authorize an ecumenical order? The movement of the spirit in our time calls the church to reflect seriously upon its response to these questions.