



Joseph Mathews on Church Renewal

The Rev. Joseph Wesley Mathews heads Chicago's Ecumenical Institute. This unusual agency, an important experimental center for the training of laymen, is responding in unorthodox ways to today's challenge to renewal of the church. Out of his experience as

*a Methodist pastor, university professor, and
U.S. Army chaplain, Dean Mathews initiates many
-but not all-of the ideas which the institute's
staff put into action. Typically outspoken,
he answers Together's questions to outline basic
concepts by which the institute operates.*

Q. We hear a lot about church renewal. Just what is the health of the church today?

This is the 49th year of the renewal of the church, for which Swiss theologian Karl Barth rang the bell back in the early World War I days.

Awareness of the illness of the church finally broke in on us in the USA in the 1930s. After a decade of giddiness, we had the sobering experience of the first worldwide economic depression. Following it was the most impossible of all wars, World War II. Then, in the midst of that, man could no longer avoid an awareness that our civilization was in deep trouble.

The church experienced the same kind of reality. The socialgospel movement, up until the 1920s, was the creative end of another age. For the next 30 years the tendency was to analyze the illness of the church through psychology. We now use sociological categories. Today we need the courage and the power to interpret the meaning of humanness, the meaning of faith, in terms of a new kind of world view.

We have to look very seriously at the kind of historical revolution we are in. There is no solution to the church's problem, except as we understand with great clarity the radical transposition that has taken place in 20thcentury civilization.

Our age calls for a new kind of faith. Although it is not going to be easy to describe, we already are beginning to see it. It is a mutation in the mind, in the intellect, in consciousness itself, which is breaking into the great drama that we call man. Nothing like this has happened before.

Q. What is the new situation for the church?

You have to understand the cultural revolution. It is bringing an alteration in human life through¹ the scientific revolution, the urbantechnological revolution, and alteration in human moods which we call the religious revolution, or the secular revolution, depending on how you look at it.

The old Newtonian concept of mechanical causation has outlived its usefulness as a metaphor for interpreting human relations. Its causeandeffect idea explained man as simply a victim of his environment and heredity. Today we know that this is not so. Man is given the opportunity to change his environment.

Fundamentally, there has been a radical shift in mindset from rural to urban. In the rural setting, we were limited; today the whole universe is open. In the past, life had a slow beat. You made one decision one day, and the next day you made another. Today it's just one decision after another.

The rural concept of neighborhoodness was face to face. Today, it must be much more than this. In urban society the only way you can be a neighbor is to lay down your life for the structures of justice that minister to the wellbeing of all people. You often don't get to know your next door neighbor, but that's not crucial. The important thing is that you offer him a new deal.

In the past, we thought the church was the place where you make gentlemen's agreements to like each other and not to disagree, to put it in extreme caricature, which anybody with one ounce of raw, red, human blood knew was for the birds and has nothing to do with the church. The church became a society of little old ladies of both sexes.

The clerics became the kept women The laymen kept us happy because we served a function for them, living a life they wouldn't be caught dead living. And if we kept our nose clean, they would send us to Palestine once in a

lifetime. Or if we were a Negro, they would give us a Cadillac.

Whereas the church should be the people who declare the word of Christ, we became the horrifying people who stood in the way of the very things that in our hearts we knew we were called **to** do.

The key to the secular revolution we are in is the recognition that every human activity and experience, whether we call it sacred or profane or right or wrong, derives from a single center. The big question is, how can the church best be the church within that situation? Therein lies the problem and glory of it today. This thing is not to be dealt with just intellectually. The Holy Spirit is always out in front. Therefore, for the layman today, his problem is no longer "Who am I?" even if he has never heard of that question. His problem is, "How can I mix the creative stuff of my being significantly with history?" Or it is the question of vocation.

Q. Is the task of the church today to try to engage people through their vocations instead of through the neighborhood, as the church has been trying to do it?

No, I don't think so. The word vocation does not mean how you earn a living. It means something like this: I've been given the unbelievable, glorious, frightening gift of living and dying my one death in civilization. Just think of that! Therefore, this means that I either commit suicide by allowing my death to be died by death, or I pick up my death and commit crucifixion. Nothing pious or religious about this. I give my life to bend history. I don't know how else to put it.

The spirit question is, how does a person beat the rap of committing slow suicide by letting life eat him up? In faith, a man is sent into the world to be the church. Outside of faith, he is simply hurled into existence.

Q. Do you see the structure of church life as we now know it changing drastically?

My heavens, yes; it already has! If you even remotely subscribe to what I have said, and if you begin with the theological assumption that God is one that you can be sure if he is going to upheave the forces of civilization, he's going to work a corresponding upheaval within his people. To be the church is a unique enterprise in every given time in history. We have to forge brand new images of what it means to be God's people.

Q. What do you see wrong with the church today?

In terms of the kind of analysis I've been giving you, it can be stated rather briefly. We are reluctant to surrender the security of patterns that met a previous situation in order to meet the present situation. The moment I do something that I think works pretty well, I want to sit down and find my security in that, rather than hastening on to see what the Lord is doing next. That might require me to forge a brand new response! I think this is the key to what's wrong.

Of course, the church has had to forge brand new operational images of itself in every age. From the Reformer's image of the 16th century, we Protestants took the idea that our task was to call into question every person and institution in civilization, offering them the promise that if they would come to terms with illusions they held about themselves, they would discover new possibilities of life. I think that is a statement similar to what Tillich called "the Protestant principle."

About the time of the close of the U.S. Civil War the American church began the great perversion of that image. It tried to persuade the status quo forces encroaching on it that it was merely a servant, a specialized institution that didn't address all of man's activity.

This loss of a sense of outgoing destiny took the form of our becoming defenders of truth. Whenever you feel that you have to defend God, you can be sure it is not God you are defending. We merely became defenders of some private truth which was really a former age's articulation of the mighty happenings of faith.

Then there is institutionalism. Now, you don't want to fall into the error of Rousseau here and say that institutions are evil in themselves. Institutionalism, it seems to me, is bad when its structures operate only to accomplish those things which are compatible with the structures. When this happens, the wheels of possibility within the group turn simply to maintain the motion of those wheels.

The third thing is the whole idea of togetherness. The secular forms of escape from life helped us along here. People thought that the way you handle the loneliness of being in a transitional age is to huddle together in some sense of mutual appreciation. Whole psychological theories were built upon this. The church bought them and entrenched them in the rural mindset of the past.

Q. What can be saved out of the church, as it is, and what should be changed?

Well, if you don't mind my being very blunt, to put the question that way is to put it falsely. You never ask, "What can be saved?" If we do this, it is just further evidence of turning in on ourselves. No, we ask the question, "What doth the Lord require of us?"

As for the institutional church, all of it can go if none of it serves today's needs. The only things that need to be conserved are the things that can be used. If the Woman's Society or men's club is a useful tool, then use it. If it isn't, let it die. If preaching is still a tool of being radically obedient, use it. If not, abandon it.

Today, any lucid person in Jesus Christ understands that there are two alternatives relative to renewal of the church. One is that the church has been said "no" to by God. Therefore, the awakened man of faith must operate outside the institutional structures of the past, creating the new forms, new structures. Several leaders have chosen that alternative.

The other alternative is to believe that the church is renewable from within, and this on several levels. But when it is renewed, a metamorphosis—and I mean a complete change not just renewal—shall have taken place. We at the Ecumenical Institute are fanatics at the point that the church is renewable from within.

Whichever alternative you choose, whether to operate outside or inside the structures, you will be dealing with a new manifestation of God's people. Neither one is preferable to the other in relationship to the divine activity. And you know something? Only the Lord knows which one of these practical decisions is correct. But those who use past patterns of Methodism as their patterns today and try only to conserve them, why they aren't even making a choice. They are simply conserving the status quo.

Q. Why do you take your particular stance?

For several reasons. First, I'm a revolutionary. The Communist Party would give its right arm for access to a "cigar box with a steeple on it" at every crossroad and village, where people at least meet once a week. A guy who overlooks that setup as an operational base doesn't know what it means to be a revolutionary.

Second, I'm a Methodist. Mother Methodism suckled me at her bosom. I heard from her the good news that I had divine permission to be in history. Not only that, she brought me in her life to where I grasped that I had a loyalty beyond Methodism, which is to say she introduced me to God. She nourished me. Methodism has supported me all these years.

Some people say to me, "Methodism won't put up with you." They're crazy! Methodism has put up with me. She has never disowned me. I'm one of her sons. Even when I say no, she supports me.

But I'm just one of hundreds. In four years, the whirlpools of renewal around our country in the local congregation are going to be flowing like rivulets. In 12 years, the renewal will be like a mighty tide.

Q. Is the local church the focal point for renewal?

The heartbeat of the historical church has always been the local congregation, but it has had a million and one forms. The forces of renewal, in one sense, began in the local church, and this is a part of the lay movement of our time.

Let me say it this way: These are the social dynamics of Stalin, and it seems to me they are just tremendous. Of course, he was a reductionist, like all Marxists. But if we correct his reductionism, he says that new conditions of history break into being through the elite group with a vision—a new vision of the possibility of the condition of history. Their job is to formulate their vision into communicable images and models.

Then the second task is that these models must be communicated to the masses. This is a horrifying educational job. That is why the local congregation is the focal point in the revolution. It is a practical revolution, and the layman, mark you well, is the only one that is going to embody that society. This is the ministry of the laity. Laymen have to discover concretely what it means to be the church in civilization. This means they have to be trained.

Q. Aren't you a training institution as well as research center?

Basically, we are not in any business but research. Training is for the sake of research. But we have to do training to

convince a minister that you can train laymen. It is hard for him to be convinced.

Our ideal setup is to have a group of laymen come in for weekend seminars along with clergymen. An amazing thing is that recruiting laymen for this is no problem. There is a ripeness in our time. This year we have run some 5,000 people through our programs here and around the nation. And, however pretentious it may sound, we think our record of success is about 97 percent.

Let any church send us 30 laymen for a weekend, and we will send back 29 awakened, revolutionary people.

Q. You say that the clergy must train the laity. But who is going to train the clergy for their task?

The seminaries should be the training forces. The only trouble is, they are not doing the job. They know this. I feel the institutional church really ought to be supporting places like ours, which can be centers of practical research. Of course, they would then have to keep their hands off us if they expect us to do the job. If they can't do that, then they might just as well create another seminary.

Q. What ought the church to do about the shortage of clergymen that everybody is worried about?

The answer is simple but very difficult. Every half-awakened guy and his brother is out to engage himself in civilization in a meaningful way. Let the church begin to show evidence that she is concerned not about herself but about humanity-willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of humanity, to move seriously in terms of renewal-and, my Lord, the young ones will flock to the ministry.

Q. What will the church be like that meets the challenge of our time?

I think it will be residential, or at least geographical in some such sense as this:

It will have as its center a temple, perhaps a church building, perhaps no more than a pile of rocks where the great celebration on behalf of all civilization takes place and where certain coordinating activities take place. Second, this center will be surrounded by stakes, as the Mormons call them, or synagogues, to use Hebrew terminology. These are the house churches. I'm afraid of that term, however, because it has been getting sentimentalized. But it is where the people gather for disciplined worship, disciplined study, and disciplined plotting, planning, and scheming together.

The third level of the local congregation will be the guilds. By this I mean a number of task forces that attack the social issues in the area. At the moment this congregation accepts the charge by God to be his people, they will push into the political, economic, and cultural aspects of life.

Not any one of those three levels is the congregation in the traditional sense-the whole web of it is.

Q. What about preaching and worship?

Well, worship, of course. In our day something tremendous has happened in that the secular world has discovered the importance of symbols. No man can be an authentic person until, in a disciplined fashion, he can dramatize his selfunderstanding. So worship is the very key.

Proclamation, the verbalization of the good news that all is good, that you are totally accepted, that everything is approved, that the future is possible and open-that has to be done. I *already know* that I am accepted, but I *do not really know* it until I hear my brother say it. So the proclamation must be there.

But that thing called preaching we do on Sunday morning, I think that is finished. I think people will gather at the temple, let us say, only about every other week, once a month, or Easter and Christmas. And this is already the trend in suburban churches. The number of people who attend every Sunday is very low. Probably the Sunday morning service will not be the operational center of gravity.

Q. Should we abolish Sunday morning sermons?

I think my answer would be yes, but I would want to qualify it. I think it has to turn into what we call a witness, which is a very, very brief statement of a possibility. This would be a part of the worship drama itself. Some tremendous experiments of this sort are going on.

Q. One of the timeconsuming jobs of the local pastor is counseling. Does this model you speak of include this aspect of a pastor's work?

My first answer to that is *no*, with capital letters and six exclamation points! And then I would want to say yes in a soft voice. The *day before yesterday* was the psychological period in the church, when all of us had to get on top of the vacuum, the suffocation, and the drought in our life. Today that isn't even where the problem is.

The best kind of counseling is from layman to layman. They are far better at it, if they have any idea what the Gospel is, and if they have its selfunderstanding. Most psychological problems, short of those that require the technical help of the trained psychiatrist, can be solved within the congregation, and particularly in its symbolic life-the worship service.

Q. What is the minister's role in this pattern?

His role is that of the pedagogue. He should be relieved of the necessity of having to earn his living, *per se*, so that he can do the kind of study that has to be done for the sake of the total congregation. He is the teacher of the laymen. Taken seriously, this is a very complex and difficult work.

Q. What can laymen actually do in renewal of the church that we have been talking about?

When an elite cadre moves out from the status quo, calling it into question and dreaming new visions, these are the ones who lay down their lives on behalf of the mass of humanity. History never has been without the people of God, and it is not now and never shall be. The people of God are those who move out into the twilight zone, onto the beachheads, those who throw their bodies over the barbed wire, calling upon the mass of humanity to move into greater possibilities of humanness. And while they move, they declare the one word without which no human being has ever been a human being and never will. That is the word of Jesus Christ.

Every man, therefore, from the beginning of time to this moment, has had to decide whether he is going to be only *among* God's people-and everybody is God's people-or whether he is going to be *of* the *people* of God.