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FAITH AND FERMENT: A STUDY IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY

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My mother was Roman Catholic, Irish descent. My father was Protestant, German. Everything in my culture told me that their religious convictions were unalterably opposed and incompatible. I never found much proof for that. But I was a youngster then, fooled perhaps by love and goodness. Now I'm older and have a sharper eye. If Christians are a deteriorating breed; if the revelation is a series of truncated opposites embodied in polarized denominations; if it is diminishing in its effect on personal and social development, this time I will not be so easily misled. This time, thanks to the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, I will be looking at the Christian in a very different way.

The fact of the matter is that my Roman Catholic and Presbyterian parents—like the rest of Christian America—were living in a different kind of world. Their world came before satellite TV; before birth control pills; before test-tube babies; before Third World independence; before nuclear defense; before world energy shortages; before the population explosion; before the civil rights movements. If my parents had been discussing these issues instead of labor unions, family life, and movie censorship, would their attitudes have been so similar; their notions of what was and was not moral so consonant; their ideas of what "church" was all about so certain? At any rate, the questions are not idle ones. Walter Buhlman writes that, if the present trends continue, by the year 2000, 60 percent of all Christians will live in the Third World but that only 16 per-

cent of the world population will be any kind of Christian at all. If Christians are to be a sign of Christ's love, someone should be wondering what kind of sign they'll be.

And we are wondering.

In Minnesota this year, church members and ministers from every stream of the Christian tradition are being asked to respond to what they believe are the basic tenets of Christian faith, to express their own attitudes toward emerging concepts of morality and belief, and to identify the practices and behaviors which they believe are impelled by the Christian commitment.

Consequently, in this *Occasional Paper* we want

- 1) to define the general purposes of this work;
- 2) to describe the content of the study;
- 3) to identify who will be involved;
- 4) to describe how the research will be conducted and
- 5) to alert the Christian community to what its outcome will be so that parishes, schools of theology, seminaries and church leaders can look forward to new and meaningful information on which to begin their own analyses.

The Purpose of the Study

To know what is in the catechisms and theology texts of a given faith is certainly one way to determine the depth or orientation of a religious tradition; but not only is that not the only way, it may not even be the most substantive.

In the first place, what the books teach and the people believe may be two different things. On the other hand, the various facets of the Christian community may accept a common concept but read its implications quite different-

ly. All Christians, in other words, may accept without question that the Christ came for the upbuilding of the Kingdom but differ markedly in where they believe the Kingdom is to be built—here or in the next world—and how it is to be done: by charity or by justice; by prayer or by action; by withdrawal or involvement.

A major purpose of this research, then, is to assess the nature of the moral and spiritual concepts now alive among church members in Minnesota, with the notion that these same ideas may be common to the Christian community throughout this country.

However, determining the lived tradition of a community is one thing. Discovering how those concepts affect its social structures or are embedded in individual psychological reactions is completely another. *What* groups do because they believe something to be true or essential is important to the whole social fabric. *How* basic beliefs touch personal self-worth or security have a great deal to say about the positive or negative effect of religion on life patterns.

For those, in other words, who believe that the Kingdom is now and is to be built here, their church may well become a social action center as well as a place of Sunday service. Those whose God is a stern and rigid parent may be rigid in their own expectations of others, more comfortable with rules and rewards than with risk.

A second purpose of this study, therefore, is to determine or identify the social-psychological effects, ramifications or complexities which ring the religious beliefs of the Christian community in the understanding that only by analyzing attitudes and behaviors, as well as beliefs, can a fuller picture of the current Christian culture be drawn.

In this era more than any other, though, it is almost less important to describe where something is now than it is to discover where it may be going in the future. The emergence of massive world needs in a climate of instant communication enable what would have been, in the past, an isolated idea to become revolution; a single defection a potential mutiny. And knowing that is an awesome thought. An image of Christians all determined to feed the hungry or refusing to go to war or intent on women's equality changes the whole contour of the world. When Christians fast or go to revival meetings or donate money, the results are real. It is astounding to consider what would happen if, out of Gospel convictions, Christians generally began to question nuclear weaponry or the separation of the churches or the justification of racism.

Consequently, this study also intends to identify emerging trends and emphases that may be capturing the focus and energy of the Christian population even in the face of older practices and concerns.

Finally, we want to know whether the beliefs that are blazing today's communities of believers are authentic developments in the Christian tradition. We want to know, too, the implications of these findings for the churches themselves. Does what is being preached from the pulpits have anything to do with people's needs or concerns? Is seminary preparation adequate to the life questions of the congregation that the new minister hopes to serve? Is the church a positive influence in the coming of the Kingdom or only part of the problem?

So, the ultimate purpose of the study is to provide a theological analysis of the responses to the study and its meaning for the churches, in the hope that churches will address the need for prophetic leadership in the present, not only Gospel stories of it from the past.

The project is ambitious but not impossible if the content can be focused clearly and scrutinized from multiple vantage points.

The Content of the Study

This research sets out to explore both the public and the private life of the contemporary Christian because Christianity is a matter of discipleship as well as devotion. How both of these facets are integrated is the central issue of the search for God. In the life of Christ both orientations are evident. One of the questions of this study is to determine whether the same balance exists in our own.

What is more, it is important to discover both the depth and breadth of the Christian impact and formation. Does "Christian" mean *church-goer, church-leader, civil activist, pacifist* or *ascetic*? Does faith in this day give security or require risk? Do Christians even ask those questions? In order to try to get at distinctions like these, the research uses twelve categories to determine the effect of the concept of a Trinitarian God on the way people regard or react to basic life situations. Each of these issues requires the participant in this study to reflect a commitment of self, a model of church, a consciousness of society and an attitude toward humanity as a whole. The comparison of these responses to standard church teachings is obviously some indicator of the synchronization between Christian formation and life values.

In each of the twelve areas the respondents will be asked to register their understanding of an historical Christian teaching; to report their own degree of acceptance for newer concepts of Christian commitment and then endorse those practices which they believe are required or necessary in actual life situations. For instance, respondents could conceivably believe that Jesus came to save all humanity, and that only their church preserves that truth or shows that way but still not go to church themselves. Out of these categories then can be drawn both a profile of the Christian credo and a sense of those commitments which are seen as essential to the Christian character.

The twelve categories deal with social systems, personal spiritual development, life issues and accountability. The topics include:

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. church | 7. human relationships |
| 2. free will | 8. national responsibility |
| 3. social justice | 9. biophysical development |
| 4. death | 10. sin, guilt and compassion |
| 5. spirituality | 11. moral motivation |
| 6. suffering and crisis | 12. prayer |

More pointedly, these subjects probe such questions as

- 1) What is the function of church?
- 2) How much control does anyone have over life developments even if they do think that the essence of Christian life is moral responsibility?
- 3) What constitutes justice and when is it an imperative?
- 4) What does death do to the Christian spirit? How does being Christian affect our attitude toward death?
- 5) What constitutes "spirituality": going to church, praying, ministering to others?
- 6) Does faith have anything to do with suffering and crises? Do suffering and crises have anything to do with faith?
- 7) Are sexism and racism social or moral issues?
- 8) Can a country sin? How? What is the Christian obligation toward national policies?
- 9) What, if anything, does ecology or energy use or conservation have to do with being Christian? Should churches have anything to do with things like ecology?
- 10) Is sin real or is it only a diminishment of psychological growth? Are guilt and guilt-feelings the same thing? Are backsliders forgivable?
- 11) When people do "right," why do they do it? To escape punishment? to have people respect them? to get to heaven? to build community? to keep the law? to maintain principle even though they know others will disapprove and punish?
- 12) How necessary is prayer and worship to Christian identity?

Each of these areas reflects a body of traditional Christian teaching. Some of that teaching has become confused, hardened, broadened. In the light of all this, where are the people?

Some inquiries are so specialized that only some people realize their importance and fewer recognize their personal implications. This study is made out of the stuff of life. These questions touch every Christian home in the country; every church in the region. Either churches are where people are, energizing the most vital parts of their lives, or, like the granges of another era and institution, they will fade in impact or become signs of nothing. This study hopes to assess the links between a Gospel faith and contemporary life.

Who Will Be Involved?

In order to find the cross-over points of the multi-denominational Christian tradition, the population of the study will necessarily have to be varied. The major orientations of the Christian tradition must be tapped; ministers as well as their congregations must be included; different regions must be represented; congregations large and small, urban and rural must have input. With all those factors in mind the following groups have been selected at random for inclusion in surveys and interviews:

Churches. Of all the churches in Minnesota, 210 representing one percent of the population of the state have been chosen to participate in the basic sociological survey of beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. These 210, it seems, are a good cross-section of the faith-life in all of America itself and so may be indicative of the concepts affecting Christian communities in general. The church groups designated for study involve:

Lutheran	Greek Orthodox
Roman Catholic	Church of Alliance
Methodist	First Church of Christ
Baptist	Seventh Day Adventist
Presbyterian	Church of Nazarene
United Church of Christ	Jehovah's Witness
Free Church	American Indian
Episcopal	Full Gospel
Covenant	Assembly of God

(Charismatic and Conservative Evangelical groups will also be included.)

Ministers. Each of the ordained pastors or official administrators of the congregations or parishes that take part in the study will be asked to complete a survey instrument. These responses will enable the researchers to determine the links between the official theological positions with the insights of the functioning ministers of the church. One of the questions to be answered, of course, is whether or not the people and their pastors share a common model of church. Another issue of importance in the ministers' replies is to determine the concerns and commitments of the church leadership itself.

Counties. In order to touch the environmental influences of the entire state of Minnesota, its eight regions and twenty-one counties within them have been targeted for sampling. As a result the ethnic traditions, occupations, life-styles and social patterns which affect both religious practice and belief can surface and be seen against the dominant cultural motifs.

Church-goers. Only those who are on current membership roles of functioning congregations will have the opportunity to be part of this study. Though many people identify themselves as Christians, hold those basic values and espouse that theology, they do not practice that faith in an organized community of believers, the congregation or parish. These "unchurched" are not included in

the study for different reasons: 1) their lack of familiarity with church life makes it impossible for them to speak to it with certainty; and 2) it is the present function of perceived relevance of the church to church-goers themselves that is a chief object of this inquiry.

The weakness of this approach is obviously that it selects as its subjects those who may well be satisfied by and affirmed in the kind of faith represented in their own congregations. But the strength or value of this delimiting lies in the fact that it is church-goers themselves who can be the best measure of the congruence or incongruence among denominations, between catechesis and life, within pastor and people.

With those realities in mind, over 2300 members of the Christian churches of Minnesota will be asked to respond to the survey instruments or interviews upon which the study is based.

The point is that the study is not only broad in scope but it is also broad in its design. If its only value were that it asked a diverse group of people the same questions, that might be enough. More than that, though, this research can test the assured and point directions for others. Rev. Robert S. Bilheimer, Executive Director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, wrote as part of the proposal that launched the project:

Survey figures show that in 1952, adherents of the Minnesota churches were 61.6% of the population, and that in 1971 they were 66.3%. Moreover, many have remarked that this church membership has not been merely an individualistic matter, but that Minnesota in a signal way has nurtured distinctive church cultures, predominantly Roman Catholic and Lutheran, but by no means exclusively so. Smaller denominations have had their distinctiveness also, and churches which embody the black and Spanish-speaking experience have also added their influence. These differing church cultures, existing sometimes in antagonism, sometimes in tension, sometimes in cooperation with one another, have nevertheless arisen from the same spiritual root, and have nurtured many of the same values, particularly those which bear upon integrity, productivity, accountability, mutual caring, and human rights and justice. What might therefore be called a church sub-culture has been a significant part of the general value system which has produced a high quality of life in Minnesota.

At the same time, change is apparent. The depth and extent of change in the spiritual and moral base of the community has become ob-

vious to casual observers and students of society alike. The erosion of loyalty to traditional values or at least to the way in which traditional values have been expressed is often noted, as is the deep conflict between freedom and authority found in personal, family, institutional and public life. Numerous attempts are made in business, government and the voluntary sector to preserve and advance human values; yet at the same time there are substantial complaints that a hard pragmatism prevails and that the demands of ethics go largely unheeded. Efforts to discover new and more satisfactory life styles, animated in part by sensitivity to social goals and in part by the pocketbook, suggest a search for values in harmony with changing social and economic conditions. Many, like the Upper Midwest Council ("Emerging Forces in Conflict") will go further, pointing to the likelihood that the pressure of resources upon the social structure will produce increasing conflict and make heavy demands upon the value structure of the community.

The churches and the traditional sub-cultures which have been associated with them are not exempt. The general public and church members alike are aware that change affects the Christian community. Some of this change is internal, visible within both Catholic and Protestant communities. Other aspects of change are observed in the relation of the churches to the general community. A leading observer of Minnesota society said recently: "I do not know where the churches are in respect of society, nor how to get hold of them." Another, studying the power line dispute, registered surprise at the prominence of "religion" among the adversaries, as well as dismay over the confusion among the same people as to what "religion" is. Within the churches, internal change and change in the relation of Christianity to the community is viewed variously, on a line ranging from acceptance and cautious optimism, to resistance and pessimism.

Not a few will wish, for differing reasons, either to write the churches off or to ignore them as relating to a merely private realm. Yet can the Christian sub-culture be wisely written off or ignored?

If Christianity has in fact a strong capacity for spiritual and moral leadership, is that not a fact of importance for the future?

If Christianity now gives scant evidence of making a significant contribution to the common life in the foreseeable future, is that not also an important fact to take into account?

In view of change within the churches and within society, is it not important to discover whether and to what degree the contribution of the Christian community is likely to be made in different terms than has traditionally been true?

How the Study Will Be Conducted

Under the auspices of the Board of Directors of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, a team of researchers has been assembled and over \$200,000 in funding monies gathered to direct and support this project. With these resources, the research can be state-wide and professional; interdisciplinary and cross-denominational; deep and broad.

The work will bring four disciplines to bear on the question and will operate in three phases.

Disciplines. The results of a 250-item *sociological* survey, 100 in-depth *psychological* interviews and an *anthropological* field study will be analyzed for their *theological* content and implications. The sociological survey will record the pencil and paper responses to questions on the twelve core categories of the study. (See page 3.) The 3-5 hour personal interviews will probe areas of ambiguity, concern or emphasis. The field study will focus on the nature and effects of church involvement in questions of civic conflict. The theological reflections will deal with the central issue: What is all this saying to the churches?

The *sociological* study will be done with 2300 members of 210 Minnesota churches, all of whom were selected at random, and will attempt to surface beliefs and behavioral norms.

The *anthropological* inquiry will study how church members relate to "big debates" in contemporary society. Among these are: growth, no-growth and equity; technology as master or servant; centralization-decentralization in society; master or stewards of the biophysical system. Involvement of church members in these is also a matter of debate which will come under review.

At least one-half of the 100 *psychological* interviews will be conducted with the same women and men who also took the sociological survey or were part of the groups involved in the anthropological study and will center on the hopes and the tensions inherent in Christian life.

The *theological* reflections will synthesize all of these different but convergent materials. As a result of the social data, these analyses will attempt to map the implications of these findings for the meaning and potential of church influence today.

The research team includes:

Project Director:

Rev. Robert S. Bilheimer—Executive Director,
Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research,
Collegeville, Minnesota

Research Coordinator:

S. Joan D. Chittister, O.S.B., Ph.D.—Prioress, Mount
Saint Benedict, Erie, Pennsylvania

Sociologists:

Dr. Robert Fulton—University of Minnesota
Mr. Gregory Owen—University of Minnesota

Anthropologists:

Dr. Luther P. Gerlach—University of Minnesota
Ms. Betty Radcliffe—University of Minnesota

Psychologists:

Dr. Paul E. Meehl—University of Minnesota
Ms. Margaret K. Brudos—Edina, Minnesota

Theologians are being selected for help in the evaluation process.

Committee on Faith and Ferment, Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research
Abbot Jerome Theisen, OSB
Mrs. Hella Mears Hueg
Mr. Lawrence M. O'Shaughnessy
Dr. Carl A. Volz

Given this bank of data and this corps of observers, the materials mined for this study will certainly be grist for growth in many places in many ways.

Phases. There are three distinct stages to the work. Phase I, research; Phase II, analysis; and Phase III, publication. The three stages will take at least two years to complete.

Phase I has already begun and will continue until June, 1981.

Phase II is scheduled for the fall of 1981 and will include preliminary analysis sessions with groups of the participants themselves.

Phase III is targeted for summer 1982.

And Who Will Care?

Some truths we live with all our lives and never recognize. Some explanations we look for all our days and never find. Some we run from; some we suppress; some we

overlook; some we crumble under. Some answers we need to know but we never even bother to ask the questions. Some insights we hold on to through every futile failure. This study will fall, for everyone, into some of those categories because it is about the great question of life: "Who do people say that I am?" the teacher? the miracle-worker? the prophet? the messiah?

So, it is hard to know whose lives will be touched by this information, dug out, heaped up, laid bare. For some it will only be an academic exercise. For others it can be a challenge. Surely for all of us it should be an examen. "What is the Church of Christ?" is surely the question that has to stretch every Christian's life.

Counselors, preachers, teachers, catechists, theologians and church leaders should all find something here not simply to study as technicians but to learn from as Christians. And to pass on.

My Catholic mother and Protestant father would have liked to know how affirmingly close or dangerously apart they were in values and hopes. They could have profited by it. So, perhaps could have the church.

This time we are going to look with a sharper eye.

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