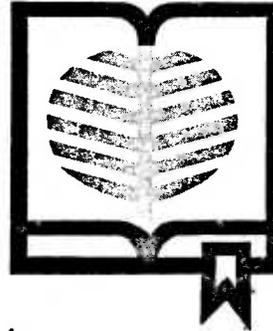


NEW YORK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CONTINUING THE BIBLICAL SEMINARY IN NEW YORK

235 E. 49TH ST. • NEW YORK, N. Y. 10017 • 212-355-4434



30 Nov 76

DR. THOMAS WIESER
WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

WILLIS E. ELLIOTT, Dean
Exploratory Programs

Dear Tom--

Bill Webber shared with me--at your suggestion that he do so with his staff--your 16 Nov 76 letter to him, and this is my trembling-and-hope response. Trembling, because I cannot answer your questionnaire without revealing where I am in my life-pilgrimage in faithful and unfaithful following of our Lord; hope, because I have never been more hopeful for Church and World. Yet I don't write as though responding to the prable's master, "Give an account of thy stewardship!"--I don't feel defensive, but rather grateful and reflective, and [at 58] in danger of a contentment lacking cruciformity, a trust without prophetic tension [which is not biblical trust at all, but rather at best a stoic resignation and at worse a hypocritical sentimentality].

I recall with joy my working with you and others on "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" and am glad for your follow-up in light of the baleful fact that few congregations got "structured" for mission. Maybe we should have dealt more with de-structuring for non-mission, or de-spair [=hopelessness] about strucutre and prayerful efforts not to re-structure but to use the human resources of the parish to meet coalitionally specific human needs, letting fresh structures appear from within this mission-action. Well, I'm dashing off a splattering of comments, no decent response to your subtly structured questionnaire, but the best I can do tonight on the run:

1. The congregation, American version, has always been a surrogate family at its best and a pseudo-family at its worst. Perhaps, at its best, "an extended family" on the boundary between the bio-family and what we used to call [before the women's revolt] the family of man. "Family" provides for these human needs: bio-support, reproduction, stability, continuity, unconditional love. Except for the first two, people look to the congregation for these needs as basic, and will not tolerate their being unmet. To the extent that a congregation meets these three needs [detailed in a just-published book by a Wellesley professor on the family], folk give it a chance to meet other private, and also some public, needs. The more I reflect on my own 10-1/2-year pastorate, the more true this truism appears to me. We liberals-radicals of the 1950s and -60s often self-canceled through the hubris of a rhetoric the congregations read as either/or: either we remain a family, or we give that up and become a revolutionary cell (maybe even a demolition team!). No, I'm not telling you anything; you've not only heard it all before, but said it yourself till you bored yourself; but it makes me feel better to say it again, and I hope you're not too bored. See it as "reflection" on our old common "action," and it'll hurt less.

2. "Stability, continuity, unconditional love" sound like mommy's work in the US feminized family, with daddy off to "work" in "the real world." The US congre-

gation is feminized, and scores of books couldn't kick masculinity into it-- so the masculine principle went "where the action was" out in "the world," whose "agenda" was to "set the agenda for the church" [as daddy used to set the agenda for the home]. I'm not defining as neurosis this fact of the feminine church in the masculine world, or its corollary within the church and in the heart of Christian leaders. It was more compensation than neurosis; and besides, I see Christianity as indeed "feminine" in the sex-role assignment of compassion, flexibility, and unconditional love to the female. But the phrase "missionary structure" certainly was masculine (indeed, quasi-military!). Sexism, literal and tropical, must yield to a complementarity of equals (Gen.2; Gal.3.6) within the heart, the home, the church, and the mission.

3. [If you had numbered your questionnaire's items, I'd have followed the numbers compulsively; as it is, I feel free to do my own numbering. Can't win, can you?]

4. For more than 14 years Loree and I have been members of the same congregation [United Church of Christ, Chappaqua NY], investing ourselves in and through its life--she, as volunteer professional director of Christian education for a time, now supervising three parttime employees; I, as teacher...and both of us in many other capacities. Only in the sense that America has no upper class [as socialist societies are "classless"!] is ours not an upper-class church, with the powers and prejudices pertaining thereto. During this time, we engaged a radical pastor who preached away the conservatives; then a conservative pastor who lost the few radicals and quite a handful of liberals; and now an interim who is the quintessence of "stability, continuity, and unconditional love" and is packing the church, which had become 2/3rds empty. But while all this response-to-the-preacher syndrome was going on, little groups were forming for nurture-and-mission action. We're now in our sixth year of 8am Saturday "Breakfast for the Hungry Hearted," which has served to meet the basic emotional needs of some high-potential folk who've thus used it as both a support group and a launching pad for mission action. [There is now also a "Sunday Night Hungry Hearted."] A Committee of Concern for unmet basic needs of people in the community sprang up through efforts of a Hungry Hearted who was totally alienated from the "structures of the congregation." The community leader for low-cost housing is in the Sunday Night group, and our town just passed legislation freeing us for multiple housing (and electing a black to the town board). The church has become a community center, with some 70 meetings in it per week. When, in witnessing to a Jewish atheist on the train recently, I said, "Our church is not evangelistic in the sense of going out and asking people to come to Jesus and church," and said so with some regret in my voice, he said "You'd never get me that way! But I'm close to gotten now because of what your church is doing for our community; it's the hub of human sensitivity!"...Tom, I'm telling this story certainly not as a success story, rather more almost as an alibi for our sticking with an effete "church" so long with so little action. The payoff for faithfulness is so small, and so long in coming, and so instant and insistent the cries of hurt and oppressed, and so polluted the good earth with propaganda and detritus...so little time, so great need for evangelic "waiting on the Lord." The art of being a churchperson: when to be Hosea, and when to "shake off the dust"?

5. Last evening, in my "Orientation in Religious Studies" course for 60 black and hispanic pastors, I said "The store-front church may be our best model for rebuilding New York City." The potential of these inner-urban churches is vast both because of their numbers [many hundreds] and because they are "families" in the sense of providing "stability, continuity, and unconditional love"-- not perfectly of course, but amazingly. José Caraballo, our dean of hispanic

studies and a Pentecostal minister, is president of Acción Cívica, a community-action organization whose successes prove the political potential of the store-fronts. "The Life-Style of [these] Congregations in Mission" is intimate beyond comparison with any other churches I know of except some in Africa. Except for Saturdays, the people gather every night in the week, the whole family coming....but why should I describe this to you, who lived years in New York City and visited a number store-fronts? What's new is that these largely introverted churches are beginning to turn outward and ask how they can be good news to block, ward, city, world. A recent street demonstration [led by José] in front of a police precinct station got action--and enough publicity to put the cause on television. Private nurture and public action are not enemies [except in schizophrenia], but natural allies.

6. I'm not being as cavalier with your questions as so far it would seem. I'm taking them to my congregation, and elsewhere. Perhaps reportage to come, but don't ask for it!

7. I'm having another look at Ellul, after some years of disaffection for various reasons. His "the false presence of the kingdom" is a useful phrase--cognate with "cheap grace" and "inauthentic structures" and "false faith." Who could fault his [FALSE PRESENCE OF THE KINGDOM (Seabury/72), p.1] "if there is no mission to the World there is no Church"? His "Kingdom" and "World" are still too dichotomic for me, but he's certainly no Manichee! And I like his definition of "mission" as pressing the Kingdom's truth and "martyrdom" as resisting the World's lie [Christianity here being more revolutionary than Marxism, which is not revolt unto resistance but rather only the maturation of established processes--a fact which speaks to liberation theology, which has become as Marx-dependent as was e.g. in theology Bultmann Heidegger-dependent].

8. I'm hopeful through the young evangelicals in America, who've healed the individual/collective, churchly/worldly splits. E.g., two Harper & Row books this year: Jim Wallis' AGENDA FOR A BIBLICAL PEOPLE and Donald Dayton's DISCOVERING AN EVANGELICAL HERITAGE. The former's radicalism is without participation in "the principalities and powers," yet without abandoning the world; the latter is with participation, on the model of pre-Civil-War evangelicalism, whose call to repentance included a call to participation in the world toward social improvement [but got hit with the Civil War, industrialization, and urbanization].

9. I'm hopeful about the emerging alliances of the disenchanted--young/old, very rich / very poor, churched/unchurched, Christian/nonChristian (especially, Jew). Jimmy Carter's coalition would have been considered fantastic only weeks before he pulled it off: the bar graphs on "religion," "class," "race," etc. are almost unbelievable still.

10. Congregations should be looking for those with outsized yearning and potential: the Christian individual who can be supported manifoldly by the congregation. Clarence Jordan's successor at Koinonia [Americus GA], Millard Fuller, is one whose conversion and nurture are a story that needs telling. We are in close touch with his super-low-cost housing mission in Africa and America [he phoned Loree from Georgia last Friday]--having built the homes for Jimmy Carter's peanut workers, and hundreds of homes in Zaire (purchased at \$4 per month in 20 years). Here is no lone individual, but one whose entire and so recent career in mission is intimately tied in with congregations "in mission."

11. As for your question on "biblical substance" in the congregation, it's increased in our congregation parallel with a fresh spirit of modesty and unity. A very radical man, recently in national news for his appearing before

a US Senate committee to attack a multinational based in America for its behavior in S. Africa, is being considered for our church; and no one on the Search Committee says he's too radical for us. [He happens to be, by training, a biblical scholar.] Our folk are passing beyond the human-potential [the Esalen, etc., movement] and the Eastern-hemisphere to the biblical: the Bible is back! Bob Moss, president of our denomination, who just died at 54, was by profession a biblical scholar, and was a radical on economic, social, political, global issues. The anguish of the 1960s deepened the spirit and sensitivities of our folk, and made Bob more acceptable than he could have been at any earlier time. [President Ford's letter to Bob's family spoke of his speaking "out forthrightly on the moral issues facing our nation today. ...a courageous and respected leader...his lasting contributions to his church and our nation...."]

12. Battle fatigue, yes; but also much deep-going, wide-scanning reflection on the extent to which we were fighting the right battles in the right places with the right forces and resources. I see a lot of M.M. Thomas' "spirituality for combat" now in boot training. Just today I was interviewed by a Roman Catholic theologian on the question of youth's present spirituality and its directions. Great films are preparing us--e.g., the passionately biblical-values "Network" of Paddy Chaevisky, an attack on the multinationals' control of the media (in this case, television, with its reality substituted for the reality of the world). The arts are now, more than ever before in our time, allies of the gospel: good news!....And I'm using Hans Kung's CHRIST SEIN [in Doubleday tr.: ON BEING A CHRISTIAN] as a text in a course on "Motivation and Ministry"--the mood of this book being "in" and hopeful, beyond battle fatigue. A book like this provides a missionary theology that is both modest and firm, dialogical and aggressive, able to address geographical as well as sociological "areas." [I was hot and cold about Uppsala/68 Report of Sec.II; for missionizing centers of power, revolutionary movements, processes-structures of rapid urbanization and industrialization, suburbia, countryside, international (rich/poor) relations, "the churches as an area for mission"; but uneasy about the neglect of geographical mission, which in effect was turned over to fundamentalist sects.]

13. The main danger for mission in US? With Jimmy Carter in the White House, we're in for something--I hope more good than bad, since I was strong for him because of his sensitivity to the poor. We won't have Nixon's obscene "sermons in the White House," but we're in danger of something like that--the sermons being preached not by imported clergy prostituting themselves for the purpose, but by Mr. President himself. "A nation with the soul of a church," indeed.And we are in danger of misidentifying the enemy. Every Tuesday morning our NYTS Administrative Faculty gathers for Bible Study, which was almost two hours this morning; we've been working on "the principalities and powers," and this morning we were on 1Sam.8 [the transition to monarchy]. Are we "a congregation" meeting thus weekly with the Word, in prayer that the word will come to us as to how to use our resources for the Kingdom? Feels like it to me.

14. "Church growth"? A leader, if he/she's worth his/her salt to the employing institution, will balance maintenance (including "growth") and mission. Bob Moss was a great leader on the second objective, in social witness; and an abysmal failure in the second, as UCC is steadily shrinking. But who says this sociological criterion of "the leader" should apply to the congregation or larger church? A tough one for me. I read the stuff from Fuller Seminary and that Growth center down in Atlanta, and I say to myself "Yes, but...." "Growth" is now such a self-canceling, as well as corrupting, notion! Our Chappaqua congregation had 2,000 members when we joined, and is now half that size....and I'm much happier with it now: it's more faithful to the LORD.

15. "Dialogue between Christians and non-Christians," yes! A lot of response, in our congregation and in the seminary and in my teaching elsewhere--e.g., the University of Hawaii--on this. Just a few Sundays ago I finished a course in "The World's Great Religions" in our congregation, and the response was the best in these 14 1/2 years. But down with "dialogue about dialogue," especially with Jews! Jews want Christians to be honest. When I preached in a synagogue the memorial sermon on the death of Israelis at the Munich Olympics, eight synagogues sponsoring the service, an orthodox rabbi came up at the close and said, "You used the name of Jesus eight times; don't you realize how that pains me?" I said "Yes, and that why I cut out all but eight of my 30 references to Jesus in the sermon." He looked startled, then burst out laughing and gave me a big hug. My opinion is that most Christian/Jewish dialog has not been much above the level of fraud driven by Christian "false consciousness" and pseudo-guilt. God give us honest dialog with our neighbors, formal and informal!

16. Our congregation is indeed affected by a population shift involving religion. In four years we've gone from 5% Jewish to 25%, and now have on Tuesday mornings in our church a course in antisemitism [taught by a Roman Catholic sister with a Ph.D. in theology from Catholic University of America].....26 people tooling themselves up as prophylaxis against an inevitable rise in anti-semitism as yids move in. [To antisemites, Jews don't move in: only yids.]

17. As you know, Gerald Jud and I and a few others were responsible for "The Local Church in God's Mission, 1968-69," as a thoroughly researched and monitored effort at achieving structure shifts toward mission in 7,000 congregations. The final evaluation was not only competent, but had the additional fillip of being done by a Jewish atheist. About 1/7th of the congregations both restructured for and achieved significant new mission. Just a few weeks ago I was reflecting with Jerry on this, and he's not enthusiastic about the results....has gone off on his own, buying and dedicating "Shalom Mountain" as a retreat-renewal center. In case you've lost touch with him: Shalom Mountain Retreats, RB3, Cattail Rd., Livingstone Manor NY 12758. For mixing the gospel with the human potential movement and social concerns, he's got the best mix I know of. But he thinks we're between the times on congregational life: not very hopeful. A time of preparation, training people for congregational life. A high percentage of his clientele are unchurched and post-churched (i.e., ex-churchpeople).

18. Charismata? An increasing percentage of our NYTS students, cleric and laic, are pentecostal and charismatic [the latter term meaning, in US, main-line churchfolk into charismata]; a little, but not much, at the cultural level of my own congregation. Some of my counselees have gotten from charismatic groups a cosmic-cellular sense of "stability, continuity, and unconditional love": all to the good. I believe in the church-organizational principle of discovering and releasing the gifts God's given his people severally "for the common good," but I'm not as much into the emotionality of the spiritistic tradition as I once was.

19. Lay theological education? Always a number of courses going in our congregation, and some on a local-ecumenical basis. Always many courses at NYTS, with preference for cleric-laic mix in courses.

Dear Tom, I hope you can make something of this mess--at least catch my spirit. God bless in this important study.

Grace and peace,

