

METHODIST CONNECTION IN A STORE-FRONT

Methodists in the Greater Kansas City area call it "the Store Front," but its door opens, not upon a sales counter, but into a throbbing center which communicates the love and mercy of God. On one side is a tavern, on the other a cleaning establishment. In the highest sense of the word the exterior of this Methodist enterprise is a "front" which secures a place for the work and witness of Christ's Holy Church in the world.

Blazoned across the entire width of this store-front church are the words: "Methodist Inner City Parish - Evangel Hall." This site was deliberately selected by Methodist leaders because it is one of the major trouble spots in Kansas City. It is the center of alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution. Around it are housing units of sub-standard quality. The population of the area is Negro. Here the Methodists of Kansas City are discovering new dimensions in the meaning of the church.

This store-front church consists of one room, 18 feet wide, 45 feet long. It is not as large as some nursery rooms in many new Methodist local churches. But in this small space there is located an amazing variety of functions and activities. It is first of all the headquarters of the Methodist Inner City Parish. Here is a common office for the two churches working together in this Parish, the Independence Avenue Methodist Church and the Troost Avenue Methodist Church. Screened off at the rear of the room is the office where the secretarial work is performed for the entire parish. Also to the rear is a movable screen giving only partial privacy to the social caseworker who interviews persons waiting in an almost never-ending line. Several other desks out in the open serve as interview "rooms." In the middle is a ping pong table. Against one wall is a piano. Folding chairs are stacked in a corner.

In this crowded space there is held each evening from 5:00 to 7:30 a recreation period. Between twelve and twenty children come to color and draw, to play table

genes. In addition there are between twelve and twenty-five young male adults who drift in off of the streets to occupy themselves in various activities (ping pong, for example). Always the activities are supervised by a staff member.

On the large plate-glass windows various signs are fixed with messages like these: "Welcome"

"Come In"

"Ministers Available"

"Social Worker Available: Hours, 12:30-4:00 P.M. Wednesdays"

"Job Referral Help"

"Housing and Employment Information"

"Typing and Sewing Classes"

"Tutoring Service"

"Boys' Basketball Classes"

Before these signs were posted and the doors were opened, the Methodists of Kansas City had not even imagined the extent of human, unmet needs which would pour in. It has been shocking to many otherwise responsible citizens to learn that there are in a community like this many desperate human problems for which there is no available help. Most citizens assume that somebody, somehow, somewhere is taking care of people in dire circumstances. But the store-front church has revealed that this is not so. People do live in cold homes during the winter, they do go hungry, they do live in dwellings where the water, gas and electricity have been shut off, and they do die because of deprivation. They are evicted and put out into the street. Babies do lack the milk to keep their frail bodies alive. Even when they die there is no way of burying them decently.

The cretion of the Inner City Parish in Kansas City and the opening of the store-front church have served as a powerful magnet, drawing together into a vital work and witness the Methodist resources of a vast urban area that sprawls over two states, many cities, two annual conferences and three districts. Methodism is

frequently defined as a "connectional system" in which all members, churches, agencies and institutions have a close and instant relationship. But, practically, Methodism often suffers from "dis-connectedness" or "un-connectedness." That is to say that some members and institutions couldn't care less about gearing effectively into the system. Methodism, as a connectional church, however, is experiencing new realization of its potential power in Kansas City, thanks to the Inner City Parish.

The development of the Inner City Parish is the result of a remarkable act of cooperation which includes the following entities:

The Missouri Area

The Missouri West Conference

The Kansas City Board of Missions and Church Extension

The St. Paul School of Theology Methodist

The Division of National Missions, the Board of Missions

Independence Avenue Methodist Church

Troost Avenue Methodist Church

And many other local Methodist churches

Several individuals have played key and crucial roles. Dr. Richard NeSmith, Professor of the Sociology of Religion, Saint Paul School of Theology, as chairman of the Metropolitan Planning Committee, has generally coordinated the entire project and supplied it with much of its refinement in concept and execution. The Rev. Kenneth C. Johnston, Superintendent of the Kansas City North District (in which the project is located geographically) has given the project an exceptionally skilled, sensitive, and enlightened leadership. The project got off of the drawing boards, and sprang into action and reality with the coming in September, 1964, of the Director of the Inner City Parish, The Rev. Harold Garman. Mr. Garman, who is a candidate for a Ph.D. in Social Ethics at Boston University, possesses the knowledge, the dedication and the forcefulness to actualize the dreams and visions of many. And suffice it

to say, it took the perception and power of a Methodist bishop, Eugene M. Frank, of the Missouri Area, to appoint these persons to their positions.

Financially speaking, the store-front program was made possible by a special grant of \$1000 from the Kansas City Board of Missions and Church Extension. Behind this support is the financial power of a special fund for the inner city being raised this quadrennium by the churches of the Missouri Area. Each district in the two annual conferences of Missouri is allocating 20% of its church extension funds to support of inner city projects in St. Louis and Kansas City. After years of sharing the general lamentation over the continually worsening plight of the inner city, the Methodists of Missouri are converting their tears into dollars, and those dollars are opening the door of a store-front church whose purpose it is to practice the love of Christ in the inner city.

Additional financing is provided by the Kansas City Board of Missions and Church Extension (\$5000), the Missouri West Conference (\$3000), The Division of National Missions, the Board of Missions (\$1000), and the Saint Paul School of Theology (\$4500) for the student interns and a portion of Mr. German's salary, since he teaches part-time on the Saint Paul faculty. Both the Independence Avenue and the Troost Avenue churches pay their portions of the ministers' salaries into the Inner City Parish treasury, while being solely responsible for their own programs and operational costs. Currently the total budget, apart from the local church budget, is pegged at \$31,480, but there are projected increases which will hopefully raise it to \$66,630 by 1969.

Mr. German not only directs the entire Inner City Parish but he serves as well as the Minister of the Independence Avenue Church. His staff consists of The Rev. Wesly Ballard, Associate Director and Minister of the Troost Avenue Methodist Church. Three students from Saint Paul School of Theology serve as student interns: David Moose, Richard Herath and Duane Stephens. Both Mr. German and Mr. Ballard live in parsonages next door to the churches they serve, as do two of the student

interns.

The professional and paid staff, in addition to Mr. Garmen, Mr. Ballard, and the three student interns, consists of Loretta Johnson, receptionist-secretary, Mrs. Arlene Members, Secretary, Mrs. Ray Stanley, part-time administrator, and Mr. Omie Nelms, a part-time youth worker.

Despite the efforts of this hard-working staff the wide-ranging program of the store-front church would not be possible without the remarkable contributions of professionally-trained people who are serving as volunteer staff:

- Mrs. David Runnells, Director of Home Economics Services, assists people with cooking problems, especially offering guidance in the proper use of government surplus foods. In addition she is conducting a study of pricings, weights, measures and quality in neighborhood stores
- Mrs. Joe Barrington, Director of Tutoring Services, has recruited a large number of teachers, retired teachers, college and high school students, to help school children with their studies. They are invited to meet in the Troost Avenue Church on Saturday mornings, bringing their books, and their special problems. This group started with one youngster, had 55 the next Saturday, and 65 the Third Saturday. One little girl said: "I never got a 100 in any spelling test before, but I got one this week because you helped me."
- Mrs. Lee C. Moorehead, a graduate social worker, is Director of Family Services, assisting families and individuals with their frequently desperate needs for food, clothing, hospitalization, medical services, housing, even such elemental problems as heat, water and electricity, and the unending want for jobs. Almost every such plea for help must be checked out with other social agencies and countless hours are spent on the telephone. The full time staff members and the interns make as many home visits as their time will allow.

- Mrs. Wayne Morris, Director of Volunteer Recruitment, is constantly assessing the needs for volunteers in the various program areas, and then spends many hours - with excellent results - in recruiting them.
- Dr. Richard Nesmith, Consultant, is a day-by-day source of expert counsel for the entire program.

It is striking that three of these volunteer staff directors are members of the Asbury Methodist Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, which has pioneered in the Methodist quadrennial program called Neighborhood-1 in which church members are challenged to give one year of their lives as missionaries to churches and institutions which have great need. In addition, the Pastoral Relations Committee of Asbury Church, located in a privileged suburban area fifteen miles from the store-front church, has agreed that its senior minister and two associates may contribute several hours each week to the program of the Methodist Inner City Parish. The other two volunteer staff persons belong to the Country Club Methodist Church in Kansas City, Missouri.

The store-front was opened in October, 1964, but already it is recognized in Kansas City as a significant social welfare agency. All of the welfare agencies, both public and private, when stretching their resources to the limit, are not able to cope with the whelming flood of human needs. The store-front has been able to serve at certain points where public funds have been exhausted and legal requirements for aid cannot be met. The Jackson County Welfare workers are burdened with crushing case loads, but it is remarkable that three top specialists have been so impressed with and grateful for the services of the Methodist Inner City Parish that they have volunteered their own professional services - without pay - for Saturdays (their days off).

The following figures may seem meager, but as relief money expended by the Methodist Inner City Parish, they represent the literal saving of lives in the less than first three months of the store-front's existence:

groceries	\$443.62
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gas turned on	95.00
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refrigerators	15.00
water turned on	25.00
moving evicted families	50.00
bus tokens	34.50
meal tickets (for transients)	27.50
purchase and installation of heating stoves.	100.00

Though the sheer physical and material needs are staggering and immediate, the store-front does not overlook the spiritual needs of people. One of the most significant parts of the program is the nurturing of "home-church" groups for the purpose of Bible Study. 1200 units of Federal Housing Projects are located within a stonethrow of the store-front. About 80% of the people living in these projects subsist on public income. They are 99% Negro. They are people who really cannot afford any kind of private housing. But they are children of God and the store-front is taking the church into their homes. After extensive calling throughout the project, one volunteer staff member, Lowell Spencer (on the staff of Asbury Church in Prairie Village, Kansas and a student at St. Paul School of Theology) organized and now conducts weekly a Bible Study group in one of the apartments. Most of the members of this group, so far, are women who have been abandoned by their husbands. They bring their children to one apartment and while they play in one corner the women gather with the minister in another corner to read and study together the Bible. As yet these women would not come to even the store-front for a religious service, but it is the faith of the Methodist Inner City Parish that the Church of Jesus Christ can exist in an apartment in a public housing project.

The hope and promise of the store-front are perhaps summed up by two persons who are performing indispensable roles. Kenneth C. Johnston, the Superintendent

of the Kansas City North District, believes that this is the true mission of the church. He believes profoundly in evangelism, but given the store-front's context of human woe and need, he says: "You cannot really evangelize people until you show concern for their aching, daily needs." Indeed, what is happening in the Methodist Inner City Parish, thanks to people like Kenneth Johnston, is evangelism.

Another person who has played a vital role is Loretta Johnson, the receptionist-secretary at the store-front. Loretta is invaluable because she grew up in this area and knows its people, their problems, their fears, their weaknesses, their hates, their hopes and their needs. Having shared their misery Loretta was attracted by the love and concern of another inner city parish, made a decision for Christ and His Church, and is now realizing her vocation as a Christian at the store-front. She says: "I know the needs of these people. They are a part of my job. People really need Christ in their lives, for without him they have only hardship. We need a church to preach the Good News that Christ has come, that he is here, that this is a place of help. These people need someone to direct them. They don't know anything about God. They don't know where to turn for help, but the church is now here to help them. They cannot deny their needs. Still this place must not be a place for them merely to 'parasite on.' If the love of God is truly here they will find, first God, and then the things they need."

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