

B E Y O N D T H E T W O K I N G D O M S .

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The first of contributions from members of The Church Service Society living and working abroad.

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ALASTAIR RIACH

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Most of the years since my ordination in 1943 have been spent Beyond the Two Kingdoms - 15 years in Africa, 27 in Canada and recently 7 months in Australia and New Zealand. In my role as educator, I have often been a witness in the pew and, as such, may have been able to be more objective about what was going on in worship.

The 27 Canadian years have been spent mostly in the province of Newfoundland where there is a strong Methodist tradition. The first great ecumenical union between Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists took place in Canada in 1925 and Newfoundland Methodists, though at that time not Canadians, became part of the United Church of Canada.

In St John's, the capital city, I have observed over the years, mild attempts at innovations in worship:

- reading small portions of Scripture, one after the other, instead of two longer lessons
- reading from modern translations usually not available in the pews
- using hymns of recent authorship from a joint United Church and Anglican hymn book
- using a credal form designed to accommodate worshippers who find difficulty with parts of the traditional creeds

- encouraging participation in the main diet of worship by youth and children
- having dramatic presentations
- using guitars to accompany singing
- having visiting choirs and brass bands
- encouraging fellowship by handshaking

I have my own views on all of these innovations and have expressed them in church publications but at this time I wish to record them only.

With regard to recent experience "down-under", in 7 months I attended service 15 times; this is neither a confession nor a boast. They were: 3 Presbyterian, 6 Uniting (the Canadian "United" has become "Uniting" in Australia), 3 Anglican, 1 Methodist (no United or Uniting in New Zealand), 1 Baptist, 1 Church of Christ. On a scale of 1 - 15 I put one of the Anglican services at the top (it was Easter Sunday, there was a full congregation with the altar in the middle, the congregation being seated all round); both lay-men and women read lessons and prayers; a general invitation was given to all believers to take communion; the singing was joyful and tea was provided afterwards. The other services were all the way down the scale; one of the other two Anglican ones came far down although the building was magnificent; this can be an instance of what a really non-participating congregation can be like.

My general impression of worship during my years in Canada endorsed by my "down-under" experience is that it is well-intentioned, seeks to preserve the traditions and is not very enthusiastic except maybe on national occasions. It seems that the faithful want it that way; they are willing to let their ministers experiment a little, provided they always come back to base.

I would feel, however, that I should go on to say that the churches I have been speaking of are struggling against big odds and may be forgiven for retreating "within the castle walls". I illustrate this by quoting from an Australian report, included in an article by the Ethnic and Religion

Correspondent of "The Sydney Herald" in mid-1988 and entitled: "Are We Beyond Belief ?"

He said:

- the latest census figures show that the decline in the numbers of Christians in Australia is declining
- belief in God has dropped from 95% in 1949 to less than 79%
- the proportion of people who say they have no religion has jumped from 0.8% in 1966 to 12.7%
- the only Christian group to make any significant gain is the fundamentalist Pentecostalist Church which has increased by 215%
- the proportions of "other religions" have risen - Muslims from 0.2% of the population in 1971 to 0.7%; Buddhists from 0.2% to 0.5% in the same period.
- there are more Buddhists in Australia than Jews.

The correspondent concluded his article by making a point which strikes a chord in my mind with regard to the Canadian scene. He said: "Perhaps it is simply that Christianity in Australia has become the religious equivalent of a spectator sport ... many of those who never enter a church maintain a vital interest in the Anglican Church's agonising over the ordination of women, the Uniting Church's deliberation of homosexuality and the Catholic debate about papal authority". I am reminded of the many non-church-goers in Scotland in 1956 who waxed vehement over "The Bishops' Report". On the other side of the coin, as it were, nothing has aroused so much anger among the faithful of the United Church of Canada in recent years as the decision of the General Council last August with regard to the ordination of homosexuals. My information is that, by April 1989, 28 ministers have demitted office and have gone seeking other denominations. No Jenny Geddes has felt the need to protest changes in forms of worship.

If there is special interest in worship on the part of congregations where I have worshipped Beyond The Two Kingdoms, it is that things should be left as they are or even revert to what they were. If this sounds as if I were speaking of the elderly, I am ! The congregations of the main-line

churches are becoming older by the year and youth in them fewer. This is how it is !

Having said all this, however, about what I might call conservatism in worship, I must make it clear that I do not want to suggest that there is no breath in the body; the spirit is at work ! The picture varies but there are congregations where things are happening. A great deal of charitable work is being done, the Bible is being studied, the world mission of the church is being supported, big strides have been made in ecumenical understanding at local levels. The church is not dead; though becoming smaller and older, it is still there and is sometimes lively.

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The Revd ALASTAIR RIACH, MA PhD is recorded in the 1989 Church of Scotland Year Book as being on the staff of Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, Canada.

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[A number of members of The Church Service Society living abroad were invited to contribute their thoughts on the worship and churchmanship of their country.

If you did not receive your letter, please do not let that inhibit your offering of a contribution. It may be that Britain is not leading the way in worship !

We'd be glad to read of your experience(s). - Ed]