

Clergyman Has Good Word To Say for Suburban Churches

By LOUIS CASSELS
UPI Correspondent

The Rev. Robert A. MacGill is a courageous clergyman. He dares to say a good word about suburban churches.

To find any signs of health and vitality in suburbia is a very unfashionable thing to do these days. It's getting so you can hardly pick up a church periodical without encountering a jeremiad against the "materialism," "parochialism" and "shallowness" of suburban Christianity.

It is a little startling, therefore, to find the Rev. Mr. MacGill saying boldly in the Living Church Magazine: "Despite the prophets of suburban doom, the church is still mediating Christ's salvation... even in Status Heights. And it is doing so remarkably well, in my opinion."

The Rev. Mr. MacGill served until recently as vicar of what he describes as an "arch-typical" suburban parish—the Episcopal Church of the Nativity, Indianapolis, Ind. He is now on the staff of the National Council of the Episcopal Church.

Not 'dreary, foolish' He acknowledges that the average suburban congregation is far from being the dedicated body of Christian disciples that it ought to be. But with all of its shortcomings, suburban Christianity is not as "dreary and foolish" as its critics paint it.

In suburbia, the Rev. Mr. MacGill says, "The Gospel is being proclaimed and received by men and women who want badly to know that

there is Good News with power to save. "The historic creeds are staking out blazing areas of eternal truth for lonely, transient and skeptical folk whose minds still clamor for the few simple certainties of life."

"The food and drink of the Eucharist are penetrating the lives of wordlings who know acutely what it is to hunger and thirst in the midst of cocktail-a-n-d-cockout plentifulness."

Instead of scorning suburbia as a wasteland of pharisaism, the Episcopal minister

says, churches should recognize that it "may well be the greatest missionary challenge to Christianity in America today."

Learned Two Lessons From his own ministry in the suburbs, the Rev. Mr. MacGill has learned two lessons which he commends to all clergymen who are assigned to this "missionary" frontier.

The first is that "suburbanites do not need the church for picnics, parties and the like... they have their own resources for leisure and recreation."

"The effort spent in so many churches on organized outings and social affairs is an essential waste," he says, because it merely provides another opportunity for human relationship on an "artificial level."

"What people want is the chance to know other Christians in some depth. Adult study programs of an unabashedly religious nature—and especially those with lay leadership—are the obvious alternative."

The second lesson is that "suburbanites are painfully self-conscious Christians because, despite their high level of book-learning, they are essentially ignorant about the Christian religion."

"Too often we ask a church member to accomplish the impossible task of being a Christian without giving him

basic instruction in what Christianity is all about.

Don't Know Bible "In the transient world of suburbia, a terrifying number have never had that introduction. They do not know the Bible. They don't know why the church is as it is, and does as it does. And they are ashamed and self-conscious because they don't know."

His remedy—which worked wonders for the Church of the Nativity at Indianapolis—is to provide adults as well as children with systematic, basic instruction in the "content of the Christian faith."

To provide this instruction, the Church of the Nativity worked out an "unshamedly

old-fashioned curriculum" in which the Bible was the principal textbook. "Modern religious educators will probably scream," says the Rev. Mr. MacGill, "but this was the moment when these suburban Christians began to lose their self-consciousness and to become properly conscious of holy God."

"I am convinced that there is a major key to the life of the church in suburbia."

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