

Rosemary Haughton argues, in this issue, that we expect schools to do a job for which they are unfitted. We expect them to supply what was originally provided by a different set of institutions—the handing down and development of the cultural and moral values of the society. Schools are not meant for this sort of job and they do it badly; instead of entering into a tradition as a medium in which they can discover themselves and grow, children are simply indoctrinated with an orthodoxy or a party line. This, she thinks, is not due to defects in teaching methods but to the kind of institution a school is.

Roman Catholics are, perhaps, especially likely to find this view convincing—it has long been recognized that Catholic denominational schools, while often outstandingly good at getting people through examinations, are almost useless as a means of handing on the Christian tradition. Children recognize ‘religious instruction’ for what it is, a form of indoctrination, and have little difficulty in rejecting it. Generally speaking, children get their understanding of the gospel at home or not at all.

Mrs Haughton’s solution is that a great deal of education should take place out of school ‘but only if the social unit in which it is obtained is small enough (so everyone knows everyone), varied enough . . . and—perhaps most important of all—stable enough’. ‘It doesn’t matter whether it is called a commune or the village-sized community . . . a grouping of small families into a living organism is the way out of the schooling impasse.’

It is interesting to read these passages alongside another recent publication which describes in concrete detail just how such background communities can come into existence. In a fascinating booklet¹ Anne Power describes the growth and development of just such a community or set of communities in Islington. They arose not out of a sense of the inadequacy of schools but out of the struggle to deal with particular problems of living ‘in damp overcrowded rooms with shared toilets and taps, and with the continued insecurity of renting from private landlords; with only dirt and heavy traffic, stairways and doorways in which their young children can grow and learn about life’. They were not educational groups but more or less militant associations for getting something human done in a brutal or indifferent world, and yet they were evidently doing the job of which Rosemary Haughton speaks—eliciting a consciousness of moral and other values.

The key to it all lies in coming together in groups of the right size: ‘People isolated in London feel overwhelmed by the task of getting things to go right for themselves and their children. But together they find new solutions. . . . One small child is bored and frustrated in London, but fifteen know how to chase and paint and

¹*I Woke up this Morning*, published by the Community and Race Relations Unit of the British Council of Churches, 8p.

dress up together for hours. One tenant has no power with the Landlord or Council, but fifty have courage and have to be answered.'

What emerges most vividly from the booklet is the sheer efficiency of ordinary people when they tackle their own problems as a group. Once they come together they find that 'they know better than any expert what problems they face . . . and that they are well able to organize and run services for themselves at a fraction of the cost a Local Authority would run into'. The story is one of struggle—with hostile landlords, with unimaginative Council officials, with developers seeking to carve out a fashionable middle-class enclave at the cost of making local families homeless. Not all the struggles were successful, but out of them have grown tough and practical groups, a tenants' co-operative, play groups, an adventure playground, a hostel for homeless teenagers—the booklet lists seventeen interlinked and overlapping groups. They are not the product of some Utopian vision of an alternative society; they have grown inevitably out of a serious attempt by people to face their own hard economic and social problems. Even their defeats have borne some fruit, for protest can be heard and remembered, even when it is unsuccessful. ('Barnsbury has become a byword in planners' jargon . . . for how not to implement urban renewal.')

Both individual Christians and Christian institutions have contributed in one way or another to this project, and the whole thing grew from a house belonging to the Society of Friends. In return the Church may receive some valuable lessons—obvious enough but worth learning again. People are at their most effective, they are most human, when they act neither as isolated individuals nor as a regimented mass. The street committee gets things done that are beyond the individual and neglected by the Town Council. There was a time when the Church was something like this. After two thousand years we know a great deal about the risks and problems created by such local churches—the dangers of fragmentation, of parochialism, of nationalism; we understand the need for an international centre of unity (Christianity in One Country is no more viable than Socialism in One Country) but these are dangers that can be faced and dealt with, that have to be dealt with again and again in each generation. It is not impossible, merely very difficult, continually to re-forge a Catholic Church out of many Churches. We at least start from what is alive, from the multifarious, partial and often apparently incompatible forms of life that are represented by such small groups, and life can in the end be brought into communication with life. If we start at the other end with a structure for maintaining unity and then have to breathe life into the units, we set ourselves an impossible task. The unity of the Church is from the Spirit of Christ, and he is to be found where two or three are gathered together.

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