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THE NEGRO MINISTER AND COUNTRY LIFE

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According to the last census, there are 9,800,000 Negroes in the United States. Of this number about eighty per cent, or 7,800,000, live in the country. It will be seen at once that the Negro problem, viewed as a problem of racial development, is for the most part a rural problem. But when we come to examine the forces at work for the elevation of the Negro, we will discover that this phase of it is at present receiving comparatively little attention and is least affected in the way of progress. Schools, churches, business enterprises, for the most part have the urban Negro and urban conditions as their objective; the country is depended upon to provide the recruits for this social conflict, but it receives little or none of the spoils of war. Its boys swell the army of tradesmen, artisans and professional men who crowd our cities; its girls enter the competition and become their companions or victims in the strife. Only recently have we come to think that any of these of right should be restored to their native heath; and then only that they might provide sinews in the form of produce for those who fight the unequal battle of the cities.

It is possible to go a step further. And that is, to take the sons of the farm, give them the best that we have in store for them, and return them to the country, there to increase its comforts, expand its interests and deepen its joys in all that makes life sweet and wholesome anywhere.

In this program, the first thing to investigate is the task that would confront such a worker. What is the work of Negro development in the country? We find four problems constantly confronting the man who lives in the country: First, how to make a living; second, how to get an education; third, how to find recreation and diversion; fourth, how to increase the usefulness of the country church. Technically they are called the economic, the educational, the social and religious phases of the problem of country life.

Nothing is more insistent or immediate than making a living. Now this is not the problem of getting something

to eat. This latter does not trouble the country Negro in the least. His brother in the city has that to face. It is probable that no rural peasant class in all the world gets more to eat than the American Negro who lives in the country. His white landlord sees to that. But when it comes to wholesome food, proper clothing, and a clean, comfortable home, he has yet to make the first step of progress. Today he gets all or nearly all that he has direct from his landlord, and he pays dearly for the privilege. The same labor wisely directed would enable him to produce his own food, purchase his own home, and give him better clothing at less cost, all with a larger measure of well-being and comfort than he has ever known before. In this respect a large percentage of the rural Negro population is but little removed, if any at all, from the conditions of slavery. To teach the simpler lessons of economic efficiency is beyond all question the most pressing need in the process of the uplift of the Negro.

As to education, little fault is to be found with the Negro. So long was the prize just beyond his grasp, that he had abundant time to place a proper valuation on it. And now he cannot get enough. If any fault attaches anywhere, it is to his friends. He took just what they gave him, and when they supplied him with a new brand he took that just as eagerly. In this line the problem is to give him what he needs.

Some have thought that the problem of Negro education was to decide, "What ought we give him?" But the rapid increase of Negro schools, the character of their work and the number of students enrolled, reveal that what the great majority of Negroes need is a sound and sensible training, not too expensive, and not too high, that will put them in touch with the life they must live, and enable them to win their way upward to independence and respect.

The South has suffered greatly in the lack of intelligent labor; not skilled labor, but common labor, that knows the how and why of the ordinary industrial processes. In this respect the country districts have suffered most. It is actually the case that in a large part of the rural South it is not possible at any price to secure intelligent service either in the home or in the field. The man therefore who will put within the reach of these rural sections an elementary knowledge of

farming industries and household arts is enriching the South beyond measure, and blessing both whites and blacks.

When one begins to look into the problems of recreation and diversion in country life, he faces perhaps the most fruitful cause of the exodus to the city. The whole career of the "prodigal son" and much of its significance turns on the fact that his father had never given his boys so much as a kid to make merry with their friends. The Negro solves his problem by a weekly trip to the city on Saturday, the frenzy and excitement of big meetings, and the oft-times questionable pleasures to be found on holidays and between times. When these fail, he joins the vicious carnival of the cities. The meaning of all this is a great economic loss in wasted time, the spending of much money that brings no adequate return, and worse than these, the undermining of both health and morals. What the farmer really seeks is variety and diversion. The twentieth century abounds in means to provide these for him almost at his own fireside, and in such form too as to inspire and help; but at present no phase of life in the country exacts so heavy a toll of the Negro's well-being as the satisfaction of his social cravings.

On the other hand, of all the factors influencing the life of the Negro, none has played so important a part as the church. This does not necessarily mean religion; for the church has been to the Negro vastly more than a religious organization, and this is especially true of the church in the country. There it is the one social center, whether for picnics, entertainments, or camp-meetings. There for a long time he got his education with the preacher as his teacher; here too his society would meet, and other public bodies. And it is still the place of assembly for general public purposes.

Reaching, as it does, all conditions of life; in touch, as it is, with practically all of its activities, there is no agent so available or so adaptable to the purpose of rural uplift as the country church. Among Negroes no gulf separates it from any class that it would serve; no ecclesiastical traditions limit the range of its activities; no prejudices weaken its hold upon public confidence. It has always been the messenger of good things to the race, both before and after slavery; there is no need that these good offices should cease.

By a like process the country preacher is the best and most available leader in the work of improving rural conditions among Negroes. He is a familiar figure and his leadership has long ago been accepted. And when that leadership has been supplied with clear, definite and practical ends, his usefulness becomes unlimited. Introduced in this way, any movement toward rural improvement is shorn of the disadvantage of novelty, and gains all the advantage to be had from the normal development of a familiar institution.

Even the limitations of country life conspire to further the success of such a plan. In the first place, financial considerations make it impossible for the country preacher to devote all his time to the service of one church under ordinary conditions. In some cases this is met by the establishment of a circuit; in most cases the preacher confines his work to one church, and gives the greater part of his time to farming. In the former case, the community suffers for want of the interest and sympathy of a resident pastor. It is the latter case that presents the real opportunity of the country preacher. Given a knowledge of practical farming, his income, in spite of a small salary, will be limited only by his own industry, while the community has the advantage of his permanent residence and wholesome example.

Again, the average country school for Negroes suffers in the matter of school-teachers. Ofttimes the local government makes no provision for a teacher, and where it does, the salary is too small and the conditions too hard to secure competent service. This situation presents an opportunity for the preacher's wife, or the preacher himself, as happens in some cases. The income is further increased, the sphere of service is extended, and another bond is established between the worker and the community.

In this way the worker has every agency that is needed by which to approach the life of the people. His farm may be made the scene of actual demonstration to his neighborhood, and the place for practical instruction of the boys and girls in the same art. In the preacher's own home, as well as in the school, girls and women may be given the same kind of instruction in domestic arts, the farm and the home both serving the community as models.

For a long time the school-house has been sacred to books and the children. A wise social sense is beginning to see this building as a social center for the whole community. And nowhere is this idea more practicable than in the country. The scarcity of public buildings makes it possible thus to unite in closer bonds all the interests of the people. Here children may gather for games and amusement under sympathetic direction. Adults may find this their meeting place for the activities of their clubs. In addition to these, it is the natural center for a campaign of popular education of a kind that combines entertainment and instruction. A country school-house built with these ends in view would never be "an idle beggar sunning."

With the growing usefulness of the school, some have feared that it will replace the church as a social agent. In some particulars it will. As a public edifice, traditional reverence will not permit the Church to compete with the school-house in the variety of purposes it may serve. Only one building is needed for general purposes. The utility of the church is on the side of inspiration and organization. The preacher will use his pulpit to guide the aspirations of the community. At the same time his relation as pastor constitutes him the natural leader in organizing them for the promotion of public interests. In every line of activity he will need the active co-operation of the people themselves, awakening their interest by distributing the responsibility. All such activities may well come within the fostering care of the church and thus be saved from exclusiveness and degeneracy.

Now, what has been described above, is to be found, in one or another of its phases, already in actual operation for the uplift of the rural Negro. We yet lack a method of uniting these agencies and providing for their general introduction. At present, one favored section will have a farm demonstrator, another a public school where industrial and domestic arts are taught. What is needed is a type of worker in whom are united these forms of service. The country preacher is the man.

The country preacher among Negroes is not scarce. Anywhere from ten to twenty may be found in almost any church. But of all those engaged in lifting the Negro, the country

preacher is farthest behind. The merchant, the teacher, the farm demonstrator, are all sent forth with special equipment. The preacher has little of any kind. What he should have is some of the training of all of them.

Such a course of training would be a radical departure from traditional theological courses. It would mean the introduction of new subjects, agriculture and social service, and the elimination of others not necessary to mention. It would give actual training in general farming. It would provide for some knowledge of the elements of various trades to be used in performing the minor tasks of the farm, chiefly repairing and building, and in making intelligent workers of the boys. Social service would acquaint the preacher with the organization and conduct of agencies designed to improve rural conditions, giving him, also, a knowledge of the sources of further help. That part of the preacher's training that might be called purely religious would have a practical rather than a theological aspect; that is, it would fit him to understand and teach life rather than theology, and such a life as country people must grapple with. Theology does not go far in the country. The more the preacher knows about life, the better for him and the community.

It would not be amiss for such a course to contain provision for instruction in domestic arts and social service among women. This, in addition to whatever religious training they might choose, would prove helpful to young women who may plan to go to the country as school teachers. The prospect of the happy union of two such workers would be as reasonable and probable as the like union of those who go to the foreign mission fields.

If one wonders where such a varied equipment may be had, he will not have far to look. The Negro is already provided with facilities which, if one believe in such a scheme, would seem almost providential. The South is dotted with normal and industrial schools where farming, the industries and domestic arts are already taught. Not a few of these also do good work in the training of school teachers. And for the most part they are situated in the very heart of these conditions already described. Such institutions need only the introduction of well-planned courses in Bible study and social

service, to enable them to send forth a type of worker, whose practical usefulness would be the crowning glory of their work.

It cannot be denied that the reaction of the skilled workman upon social advancement is limited to such improvement as his particular trade introduces. The justification of such contributions to society lies chiefly in their individual achievement; but when an institution has sent forth a worker equipped as above, it is making a direct and general contribution to the elevation of the great mass of Negroes and is winning for itself the largest possible measure of justification for its existence.

Incidentally a plan of this character would solve one of the very serious problems in the education of the ministry, viz.: the subsidy of the student. Practically all our theological seminaries make a rather generous contribution to the support of the student. In our normal and industrial schools the student is rendered largely self-supporting in the process of learning his trade. In the same way the student in training for the ministry in the country would reduce the cost of his education to the minimum by his labor in field and shop.

It need hardly be said that to elect such a career would require the highest qualities in the candidate. But the fact that in the county where the writer lives, less than six Negro preachers out of seventy-five are not farmers, is the indication that there are many who are willing to enter such a ministry. The proposals above are simply that those who do elect it be given the best possible equipment for their work to the advantage of themselves and the people whom they serve.