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THE RECORD OF A YEAR

Progress of the Work
of the General War-
Time Commission of
the Churches
1917-1918

by

REV. WILLIAM ADAMS BROWN

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*THE following report was presented at the
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by

William Adams Brown

Secretary of the Commission

The Record of a Year

By

Rev. William Adams Brown

MR. CHAIRMAN and Members of the General War-Time Commission:

A year ago, in New York City, the greatest center of population in the country, this General War-Time Commission was born. We meet today in Washington, the seat of the Nation's Government, and the center from which the threads of leadership reach out to the ends of the earth, to make report of the year's progress. It is an encouraging story that we have to tell. In many different lines we can register distinct progress over a year ago. The progress appears in our more vivid consciousness of unity, in our closer practical co-operation, in the clearer definition of the function of the different agencies that are working together in the common task, and, above all, in our enlarged program for the future. It would be an agreeable task if time permitted and I were not as certain as I am of the Puritan conscience of our Chairman, to pay a tribute to the different influences that have co-operated in bringing us to this place.

I would like to speak, first of all, of the attitude of the various representatives of the Government with whom we have had to do during the past year, and who have met us uniformly with a courteous sympathy which we cannot too highly appreciate. There will be opportunity as time goes on to refer by name to some of those without whom our work could not have been done. I should like to refer to the work of the different

denominational war commissions whose confidence and practical support, given in increasing measure, has made possible whatever has been accomplished. I should like to speak of the services of the officials and commissions of the Federal Council, which brought this War-Time Commission into existence, through whose facilities alone it has been possible for us to do what we have done and with whom we have been cooperating more and more closely throughout the year. And what shall I say of those great arms of the Church, the Young Men's Christian Association and the Young Womens Christian Association, whose expansion through the year, in their far-sighted and many-sided programs, we have witnessed with so much interest and so much satisfaction? Not the least of the elements of progress that we have to report is the constantly closer relationship into which we have entered with the leaders of those organizations, as we have taken up with them in conference the many practical questions that have arisen and tried to devise the most effective methods of work in and about the camps.

I should like to speak of our closer relationship with our fellow-citizens of other religious faiths whom we have touched in the great task of patriotism, of that spirit evidenced, for example, to take but a single instance, by Colonel Cutler, the Chairman of the Jewish Welfare Board, who was the first to protest against the proposed removal of the Christian cross from the insignia of the Chaplain on the ground that it was the right and the duty of the Christian people to express their religious convictions according to the symbol which was dearest to them.

I should like to speak of the Committee on the Churches and the Moral Aims of the War, which

independently and yet in a most co-operative spirit, has been working at a different phase of the common task, that committee to which we owe the presence of the distinguished visitors whom we shall hear in the course of the day, who have come to us to express the Christian sympathy and fellowship that bind us to our fellow Christians of Great Britain—whose coming is a symbol of the wider fellowship which will some day, we dare to believe, unite all Christians in a world-wide brotherhood of faith and service.

But my task here is simply to speak of the part that has been played in this many-sided activity by our General War-Time Commission. It will be possible for me in briefest outline to touch upon three or four only of the marked evidences of progress for which I think our work in the War-Time Commission may justly claim some small share of credit.

An Agency for the Common Work of the Churches

First, and most important of all, in the Commission there has been brought into existence an agency through which the churches can work together without the sacrifice of principle. It was for this very purpose that the Commission was brought into existence. You remember the situation a year ago. Many different Christian agencies were operating in the same or allied spheres without any common clearing house. It was in the hope that we might create such a clearing house that the Commission was appointed, and I think that your presence here today is the best evidence that that has been accomplished.

There have been many ways in which the Commission has acted as a common agency. It has acted as such an agency in the acquisition and dissemination of information. We have made

surveys of the camps and hospitals which have been made accessible to you all. Through our service bulletin sent to the different commissions, through the clip-sheet which has been issued to the religious press; above all, through the many-sided contacts which it has brought about between individuals, our Commission has made possible an understanding between the different religious agencies, which I think we may fairly say would not have been possible in any other way.

Contribution to the Religious Life of the Army

— Again, the existence of the Commission has made it possible to do a number of different things which could not easily have been done otherwise, because there was nobody else to do them. These things have been of all kinds, from the erection of inter-denominational buildings in such centers as Camp Upton and Camp Dix, where there was no single body to handle the mass of detail which was involved, to devising a form of admission which could be used by the Chaplains in France for those men who wished to make a confession of Christ and to join the Church. Today, through this form, the churches can follow their men to France and in the person of the Chaplain, receive the confession which he in turn transmits to the home church. If, in the providence of God, before the letter carrying the news home arrives, the man who makes the confession should be called to join the great army on the other side, his name will be entered upon the church roll as one who actually entered the church fellowship while serving under the flag.

A Voice for the Churches

In the third place, the Commission has acted as a common agency in those connections in which it was the desire of the churches to speak

unitedly for the Church to the churches and to the Nation. To use but a single illustration: In connection with the Memorial Day celebration, a celebration which, at the suggestion of our President, was given a religious tone, our Commission was the means of gathering expressions of loyalty and patriotism from the churches, which were sent in a memorial album to our President, and I have here a letter which he wrote in response to that message, a message that deeply touched his heart. May I read that letter? It was addressed to Dr. Speer:

“I thank you sincerely for sending me the very interesting and inspiring messages from the several churches which you have been kind enough to have made accessible to me in a binding. If I followed my own impulse, I would certainly reply to some of these messages, but I see only too clearly that if I began I should begin to discriminate as between one message and another or else be obliged to answer them all, which would be out of the question. I must content myself with asking you to avail yourself of any opportunity you may have to say with what interest and inspiration I have received them.

Cordially and sincerely yours,
WOODROW WILSON.”

This common action has taken place without any sacrifice of principle. We recognize the deep convictions and the historic traditions which inspire and which support the different bodies who have been working together in this War-Time Commission. We have not attempted any action that would involve any sacrifice of conviction on the part of any who have co-operated with us, but we have believed, and we have been glad to find our belief confirmed by experience, that there was a great body of common Christian conviction on the basis of which we could work.

The Work for Chaplains

In the second place, we have done something to promote the religious welfare of our Army and our Navy through our work for our Chaplains, regular and voluntary. This matter will be brought before you so fully by those following me that I will spend but a single moment upon it. But I do want to say with the utmost force of conviction that there is no one of all the interests committed to us which has engaged more of our time, our thought, our effort and our deep conviction. Here in Washington you know what has been done through the General Committee on Army and Navy Chaplains, which is the agency with which the Government deals in the selection and appointment of Protestant Chaplains. We have endeavored to reinforce and strengthen the work of that office and in addition, we, in New York, have had not a little to do through the Chaplains' Equipment Bureau, which, acting on behalf of the different cooperating bodies, furnishes needed equipment to the Chaplains as they pass through the city en route for their port of debarkation and the front.

More important than any specific thing we have been able to do for the Chaplains is the effort we have made to put them in their proper place in the consciousness of the Army and of the Nation. We have not succeeded in doing everything that we wanted to; we have not succeeded in doing all that ought to be done; we have not succeeded in doing all that will be done. There are some of our friends who appear to believe the General War-Time Commission is a more powerful agency than perhaps it is and they have wondered that we have not accomplished more; but when one looks back and compares the situation a year ago with what we see

now, and looks at things in the large perspective, I think we have every reason to thank God and take courage. Then the Chaplain was a regimental officer pure and simple, without any contact with the Church, without any recognized place in the large program of Christian service which was being outlined by the great voluntary agencies that fill the public consciousness. The Chaplains were few in number. They had no equipment, no proper training, no organization and no clearly defined status. At every one of these points we note progress. The number of the Chaplains has been largely increased through the passage of the bill providing for one Chaplain for every twelve hundred men. The responsibility of the Government for the equipment of the Chaplain has been conceded in principle. Provision has been made for the training of Chaplains through the training school at Camp Zachary Taylor. The status of the Chaplain as a spiritual officer has been more clearly defined and safeguarded. In France notable progress has been made through the organization of the Chaplains under Bishop Brent and his associates into a compact and efficient working body. Above all, the principle has been recognized by the Government and by the churches that the Chaplain is the responsible leader of the religious forces of the Army and of the Navy.

Two points that will be touched upon by those who come after me are the organization of the Chaplains in this country and provision for a proper rank commensurate with the dignity of their office and the importance of their service. On the last point I want to say only this single word. While we appreciate the reasons that have led some to believe that it would be wiser to remove the Chaplain's rank and let him serve as a purely

spiritual officer, we believe that so long as he remains an officer of the Army, he ought to be put in a position where he stands on a par with the men who serve in the other arms of the service.

Voluntary Chaplains or Camp Pastors

Of the work done by the voluntary Chaplains or camp pastors, I cannot speak here. It has occupied a large part of our time and no small share of our effort. In many different ways we have tried to serve these voluntary Chaplains. We have held conferences which have brought together groups in different cities; we have written letters sharing with them the experience which has come to us of the possible ways of most effective service; we have prepared a brief for the Government setting forth in the fullest way the services which they have rendered; and only yesterday a conference was held with the War Department in order to discuss the ways and means in which their services might be preserved in a new and more effective way during the coming year.

In connection with this matter of the voluntary Chaplain, a large question has emerged upon which I cannot enter here, a question of the effective mobilization of the voluntary religious forces of the Nation. We see today the country's manhood drafted and assigned for war service on a nation-wide scale, and we cannot believe the Christian Church will fulfill its function in this great war adequately until we devise some method by which we may survey the religious task of the churches on a scale as comprehensive. Why should not the ministry like the rest of the Nation's manhood, morally at least, be drafted into the service and assigned, each man in the light

of his peculiar gifts and fitness, to some task to be administered on behalf of the Church as a whole?

The Moral Tone of the Nation

The third of the points in which we can register progress is the work of the Commission in providing an agency to reinforce the efforts of the Government in its attempt to promote the moral welfare of the Army, and so of the whole Nation. I would like here to pay, as no doubt those who follow me will pay in fullest measure the tribute we owe to the Government for its stand in this great matter. Never before, I believe, in the history of the world has a War Department entered upon a great war with such a moral ideal as has inspired those who have directed our American Army. It was my privilege to speak recently with a distinguished French clergyman who had visited this country, and his testimony as to what it meant to his country to have in its midst an army that stood for the kind of ideals for which our Army has tried to stand, I wish I could rehearse in his own words. He said, "These young men are ambassadors to interpret to us the genius of your Christianity, and the more you send, the better."

You will have brought before you in due time what the Commission has tried to do to reinforce the Government in this great task. I will only say that as we have been coming more closely to face the problems which this attempt raises, our thought has necessarily been led beyond the Army to the Nation from which the Army comes. As General Pershing said in a letter which will doubtless be brought before you at the proper time, "After all, it is a common fight—yours there and ours here. What is necessary for the manhood of the soldier is necessary for the man-

hood of the civilian." And it is for us to devise a way in which the ideal which we have set for our Army and our Navy may be carried over and made effective in the life of the Nation as a whole.

A Program for the Future

This matter of the moral tone of the Nation is but one of a group of larger questions which the year's experience has brought to light. I shall have time to hint at them only as I touch for a moment on the last of the four points, namely, the service of the Commission in outlining the program through which the Church can approach, unitedly and constructively, the solution of the new problems which the war has revealed. These new problems center in the great industrial communities which the war has brought into being—in our munition factories, our shipbuilding plants, the great centers of industry which in so many different fields are co-operating with the Government in the gigantic task of supplying the sinews of war. Here is a field all but untouched, but a field which the Christian forces must enter. I am glad here to bear my testimony to the wise and far-sighted plans which are being made by the Young Men's Christian Association and the Young Womens Christian Association to do for the men and women in our industrial centers the same kind of thing which they have so well done for the men in camp. But we feel that however much they may do, there is a sphere that belongs to the organized Church that no one else can fill.

There are two possibilities before us. We may approach our problem in an opportunistic way, taking it piecemeal and letting each body try to handle its share independently, as we did in the case of the cantonments; or we may attack it

together as parts of one great organized body representing the Church of Jesus Christ.

We propose to do the latter and for this purpose have created the Joint Committee on War Production Communities. This is a committee of sixteen persons composed in part of representatives of the Home Missions Council, a body which brings together the great Home Boards; in part of representatives of the Council of Women for Home Missions, which represents the different agencies of women engaged in Home Missions work; and in part of the General War-Time Commission, acting through the Commission on the Church and Social Service. This Commission has mapped out a program for a united approach to the industrial center and has secured the support of the chief co-operating agencies, including the Young Men's and the Young Womens Christian Associations.

A Task for All the Churches

This program will be laid before you in detail today. It requires for its full and successful operation the co-operation of the churches on a scale far greater and far more concerted than ever before. We shall bring before you a proposal for a joint campaign on the part of the organized Protestant churches, properly defined and related to the other campaigns that are being planned by other bodies, which will explain the special work which the Christian churches are asked to do, and which, if successful, will generate the power which will make possible a long step forward towards larger and better things in the future.

Mr. Chairman, may I say this only in closing? While I have confined what I have said to matters which have come directly within the purview of

our War-Time Commission in reference to its more immediate tasks, and while I have left many other things of supreme importance untouched, as for example, the work done by our committee on negro troops, which has made an intensive study of conditions affecting this important section of our people, a study which has already begun to bear fruit, or the work of the Committee on Recruiting and Training for the Work of the Churches at Home and Abroad, while, I repeat, we have been concerned primarily with these detailed tasks, our thoughts have ever been turning forward to those larger problems of reconstruction in the Nation, in the Church and in the world at large for which alone this war is being fought, and through the successful solution of which alone we can achieve our fullest measure of victory. How these problems are to be attacked, and through what agencies, we shall consider at a later time; but it has been our conviction that the most practical preparation which we can make for taking part unitedly in these larger tasks is to work together intelligently, unselfishly and with unstinted devotion at those immediate duties which the providence of God seems to be laying at our door.

I want in closing to pay my word of tribute to the many whose helpful co-operation given in unstinted measure has made the work of the leaders of the Commission easy, and not least to the members of the staff of whose devotion and unselfishness I cannot speak too highly. Above all, I want to voice our thanksgiving to Almighty God for the best gift of the year, that ever deepening and more vivid consciousness of a unity of the Spirit that has become to some of us just as certain a fact as the things our eyes can see. I recall one meeting some months ago, when

a group of our camp pastors met for conference about the practical tasks of the Christian Church. We sat from morning until long into the afternoon, when suddenly a suggestion was made that we stop our discussion of details for a moment and lift our thoughts to our main objective, the common purpose and the common faith for the sake of which we had come together. We were men of many communions, of many antecedents, of many creeds, but as we spent that short half-hour in contemplation of the eternal realities of the Spirit for the sake of which all these other things were being done, we were conscious that we were in truth one. We spoke of the love of God as made manifest in the person of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, of His sacrifice on Calvary, of the dignity of the individual soul called to fellowship with Christ, of the righteousness of God and the need of repentance, of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, of the authority and responsibility of the Christian Church. And, as our minds and hearts were drawn together in the contemplation of these great things, our differences were forgotten, not because we had sacrificed anything that was precious, but because we had reached down to those deeper depths in which our spirits touched the spirits of our fellow Christians in adoration of that which was most sacred and precious to us both. We believe that such a meeting as this, that the many meetings like this that are being held all over this great country throughout the past year, will lead us out into the larger unity which alone will make it possible for the Church to fulfill its highest mission. With that thought and in that faith we go forward hopefully into the work of the new year.

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