

THE CHURCHES IN HAWAII *

By Dr. J. Leslie Dunstan

The task set before us in the assigned subject is to make some observations about the state of the Christian churches in Hawaii. We must at once delimit that task in a number of ways lest we be openly guilty of egotistical presumption. We cannot speak of the Catholic churches for about them we are, generally speaking, ignorant. In like fashion we must leave out of our thinking the Mormons, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Christian Scientists, not only because our knowledge of these is practically nil, but also because they are, in one way or another outside the rather broad road within which the Christian churches move. There remain then the so called free churches of Protestantism.

Even in respect to these churches one must claim a considerable degree of ignorance. Some facts and figures are available, but these do not mean very much as they stand. They require interpretation, which of necessity is done with the outlook and the standards of judgment one possesses. So that while we undertake the task assigned to us, we do so in the realization that the result will be coloured by our own individual position and will be of value only as we use it as a foil for our own thinking.

It is a matter of deep regret that there are a number of the free churches about which we can say nothing. This is unfortunate because they have come to occupy a significant place among our people. We refer to the so called "sect or cult groups." During recent years representatives of these movements have come to Hawaii, have enlisted followers, built buildings, and are conducting active programs. We do not know how many of these churches there are, nor how many people are drawn to them. That they are here, we are sure, for it is hardly possible to drive along any of our main thoroughfares without passing one or more of their centres. Through observation we might come to certain conclusions about them, but we could not be certain of those conclusions since they would be so inadequately grounded. However, if the churches of this type in our Territory are similar in character to those found on the Mainland, we can suggest that their existence here shows a trend in the make-up of our population and the inability of the denominational churches to meet the needs arising through this trend. In the statistics which follow, we have included esti-

*This article was prepared and presented first in the spring of 1951 to a group of Protestant ministers, whose interest and concern it immediately evoked. Some churchmen are convinced that it presents far too pessimistic a picture of the role of the Protestant church, whose strength and influences, they insist, can never be measured in mere statistics of membership. Others, however, have been startled by the implications of Dr. Dunstan's study and urge a broader dissemination of its findings among Protestants. It, perhaps more than anything else, is responsible for stimulating the Honolulu Council of Churches to initiate late in 1951 an Island-wide study of religious trends. The editors of *Social Process in Hawaii* are happy to be able to make Dr. Dunstan's provocative and unrevised statement available to a wider audience, not as a means of stirring a lethargic Protestant church to action, but as a contribution to the growing body of factual information in the field of the sociology of religion. When Dr. Dunstan uses the title, "The Churches in Hawaii," he has in mind only the Protestant church as becomes clear in his opening paragraph.

mates to cover those involved in these churches, but that is as far as we can go. They deserve our attention, if for no other reason, than that they are centres of religious life in Hawaii.

As nearly as can be discovered, taking the figures reported by the denominations established in the territory and adding estimates for the sects and independent churches now existing, there are approximately thirty thousand Protestants. Our total population is now about 485,000, so that the Protestants are less than 6 per cent of the people; or to say this in another way, one out of every seventeen persons in Hawaii is a Protestant church-member. In the United States as a whole, according to the latest figures 32 per cent of the population are Protestants, or approximately one out of three people. Clearly, our churches are a minority group in the Islands.

Of interest in this connection, although a subject which we cannot follow out, is the percentage of Protestants in Hawaii's population over the years of the last century. According to fairly reliable figures cited by Professor Kuykendall in his history of the territory, in 1850 25 per cent of the population were Protestant. Many things have happened during the past one hundred years that have affected the Protestant churches: a sizeable influx of people from the Oriental countries has taken place; the Roman Catholic church has expanded its work; and other non-Christian, non-Protestant religions have won adherents. These developments may serve to explain the change that has taken place in the relative position Protestants have in respect to the total population, but they do not alter the present fact. We are but a very small group in our Islands. And if we would have this fact further emphasized in our minds we need to remember that in 1836 Dr. W. S. Rushenberger reported that the Hawaiian people were a Christian nation and that three years later Mrs. Gerritt P. Judd could write, with ample justification, that only a few persons could be found in the Hawaiian kingdom who did not regard themselves as Christians. Whereas, Protestants were once the majority group in the population they are now very much in the minority.

Moreover, the thirty thousand Protestants are divided into nearly two hundred different churches. That is an average of 150 persons per church. It is agreed by fairly competent students of church life that in our western economy there ought to be a minimum of three hundred members if a church is to function as a effective organization. Our average is half that, but the average is deceiving. Two churches have over one thousand members each, nine churches have from five hundred to one thousand members, and eight more have between three and five hundred members. Only nineteen of the churches have the required minimum membership and together they account for nearly twelve thousand members; this leaves eighteen thousand members for the remaining 181 churches, or an average of one hundred members. And those figures are for the listed membership, which as you well know, is usually quite in excess of the number who are really active church people. So that while as a whole we Protestants are a minority group, we are also organized into churches, the majority of which are in size far below the level of a possible effective program.

Then further, most of our churches were organized either during the early years of mission work in Hawaii or during the years when new peoples were brought here from the Orient. It is difficult to determine exact numbers here for choice must be made somewhat arbitrarily. But it would appear that scarcely more than seventeen or at most twenty churches have, what we might call, a modern origin. The significance of this lies in the character of the churches when they began and the difficulties they have had

to face through the years because of their origin. Our churches were racial churches, and as such the life within them was molded by the traditions and the culture of their members. It is not proper to speak of Hawaiian Christianity, or Japanese Christianity, or Haole Christianity, but it is in order to say that Hawaiian patterns of life were taken into the churches by the people, and likewise Japanese and Haole patterns of life and all the rest. But through the years tremendous changes have taken place among the population of our Islands. You may call the changes the process of Americanization or use any other term you like. In essence, the ways of American life have been taught and practised, and these have, at many points, cut across the older ways of life which had been incorporated in our churches and to a certain degree made sacred.

Take, as an illustration, the Hawaiian churches. Basically, those churches were family affairs. And this does not mean just father, mother and the children; it means all who have descended from a single ancestor. A man told me, not long ago, that he had been to his family reunion the week-end before. When I asked how many were present he said he did not know, but it took four large H.R.T. busses to transport the crowd. He spoke, not only of a single family, but also of his church. We have never tried to discover how many different families there are in our churches, but one suspects that if all relationships were acknowledged and all family trees drawn the number would be relatively small. So we picture churches that are built not only through faith in Jesus Christ but also on the ties of blood connection that form a family. But one of things that the new life in our territory has done is to cut across such relationships and to make them of little importance. The individual, as such, has become the significant entity, instead of the individual as a unit in a living group. And as the Hawaiian churches have faced this change, their unity has been broken, their program lessened in effectiveness, and their membership made smaller.

Then these same churches have been forced to meet another element in the change. When the churches were family groups they were controlled, as were all tightly knit family groups, by the head of the family and his counsellors. The head was assumed to know the needs of the group and to be able to guide action so that those needs could be met. Members of the group followed the direction of the leader and deferred to his planning. And the head assumed full responsibility for the welfare of the group. But the changes that have taken place in Hawaii have taught people, and especially the younger people to think for themselves and to choose the leaders they desire. What we commonly call the democratic process has been made a usable and desirable tool for the group life of many. And that has profoundly upset the churches, their order and the individual members.

These two conditions, which have existed not only in the Hawaiian churches but in the others as well, are but illustrative of a number of confusions produced in the churches because of their origin and the history through which they have had to live. They had in their beginnings characteristics and ways that have been challenged and called in question by the development of the territory. This has meant that the churches have been groups of people that have known uniquely the strains and the stresses that have moved through the entire population.

In this we have been dealing with the majority of the churches. There is a minority, we estimated their number at a maximum of twenty, which have been organized in more recent years. They tend to confirm the observations we have just made. They are made up of younger people for whom American ways and the American outlook are traditional. They do not have within them an older nucleus of people who were the church a ge-

neration or more ago and thus they have been free to accept such patterns of organization and program as they have been taught by their organizers. They represent a new strand in the Protestant life of the territory.

Then we must go one step further. Not only are the people who are Protestants separated into two hundred different units, but those units are separated from each other by denominational affiliations. The denominations each bring the units belonging to them together so that they have a sense of unity. But this only means that among Protestants there are a number of unities. So that instead of thirty thousand people feeling their ties one with another in their religious faith, smaller numbers of them feel themselves united as over against the others. This separation is accentuated because many of the churches are still dependent upon mission support and thus must sense their denominational connection, and because there are those churches which emphasize their separateness and thus bring the idea to the attention of all the people. Over against this, the very fact that the churches exist within a circumscribed geographical area and a fairly static population tends to mitigate this dividedness. And of recent years there have been some efforts made in getting the churches to work together and feel themselves within a single fellowship. Yet the divisions among the churches remains.

These, then, are the Protestant churches. Two hundred organizations, scattered across the territory, many of them with small memberships, separated from each other by race, tradition, status, experience, and affiliation. Altogether their numbers are but a minority of the population, and those numbers, divided as they are, can hardly have the force even of a minority.

If that is the objective picture the churches present, what of their inner life? It is indeed difficult to measure that or to judge it with any degree of accuracy. There are certain evidences which may appear to be indicative but these are in no sense decisive. However, we may mention them. Of the ministerial leadership now active in the churches twenty-three men were born in Hawaii. In this figure the leaders of the Hawaiian churches are not counted, for they would of necessity have to be indigenous if they are of the Hawaiian race. Presumably, churches should produce their own leaders if they have strong life, yet such has not happened to any great extent through two and three generations.

There are no figures available to show how many new members the churches have been adding each year. Every evidence would show that the new members are joining the churches although not in very large numbers. And it would appear that the accessions are only slightly greater than the losses. New churches have been organized, but when one deals with the Protestant population as a whole, it seem as though these churches have come into existence largely at the expense of those earlier established. The denominations have been emphasizing the work of evangelism for the past few years, some of them using the slogan, 'each member win one'. but the results have not been noticeable. Such growth as has taken place has been small indeed. It may be made up of scarcely more than Mainland newcomers transferring their church membership and the children of church members who have reached membership age. Yet the winning of new members is a sign of the vitality of a church.

A considerable number of the churches, and here we speak of those which maintain a pattern of organization typical of our country, are not yet self-supporting. It is obvious, in view of their size, that they could not be.

The cost of operating a church with a full time pastor is too great for the churches to carry. So each year sums of money are made available through mission sources for the aid of churches that cannot pay their own way. What effect this has upon the members of the churches is a question that cannot be answered with certainty. It may be that they think of religion as something which is paid for by others, or it maybe that they see in the outside help a temporary necessity from which they strive to escape. But again, a church that is a vital organization takes the responsibility for its own support.

Most of the churches conduct Sunday Schools in which children and young people are trained. The enrollment in these schools is slightly under twenty thousand or two thirds the size of the churches themselves, and enrollment figures for these activities are notoriously greater than attendance figures. It has sometimes been said that Protestant churches ought to have church schools with enrollments larger than their membership if they are to maintain themselves. This is not the case in Hawaii.

The churches give to missions. According to the latest figures available this giving totalled nearly sixty thousand dollars in one year or two dollars per members. This, of course, was over and above the contributions which church members made to the support of their own organizations. This giving is less than Mainland congregations, and whether it represents the result of promotional work or is the product of an understanding of the world-wide church we do not know.

These evidences, the raising up of indigenous leadership, the recruiting of new members, the willingness to assume the financial load of the churches, and the contributions to benevolences are indicative of the life of the churches. If they were definite indices we should have to conclude that the churches are relatively weak. But they are not definite for they have to be taken together with other factors in the condition of the churches. In light of the relative smallness of a majority of the churches and the many problems with which they have to deal the wonder may be that they do so much.

Now we may venture one or two observations about the churches which are not tied to any recorded data. Admittedly these observations are completely personal and are open to criticism. It may be that they are quite inaccurate, but for better or worse here they are. First, the Protestant church people, in the main, know very little about the faith they profess. Members can repeat parts of the Bible, the creeds, the prayers, but that ability means very little. The grasp that most have upon the living realities of the faith, so that they feel its impact upon them and respond, is most elementary and perfunctory. It is next to impossible to arouse much interest among the people in a consideration of their religious belief, and anyone with a fair knowledge of Christianity can readily hear heretical statements put forth as true doctrine. And yet the Protestant churches rest upon an understanding people, those who are able to be their own priests.

Second, the program of the churches is sparse, disorganized and traditional. Sunday services of worship, the celebration of the sacraments, the mid-week prayer meeting and occasional social gatherings are the general rule. Here and there other features have been added, and here and there other features, holdovers from past days, remain. The former have not yet taken substantial or wide spread root and the latter are slowly dying. The churches excuse the paucity of their programs on the ground that the members are involved in so many other community activities that they have little time for the church. And if the members knew whereof they stood this

would be quite in order. But that the churches take up so little time of their members and that in activities which are only an accepted church pattern appears somewhat serious.

Then, third, the churches as such play little or no part in dealing with the problems that arise in the life of the territory. Many things are happening to us as a people, in our social organization, our political structure and the economic order which makes it possible for us to live. The churches are part of the scene and they should bring their influence to bear upon the events that occur. Perhaps they do through their members in ways we cannot see and to degrees we cannot measure. That we should expect. Yet the churches themselves are in the main silent and inactive as though the faith they held was meaningless for the world in which they stand.

Enough. After all that we have said we need to be reminded that the churches exist. They are in our midst and it may be that in them God's Word is being spoken and perchance being heard. We may take our description as a point of departure if we will, a point of departure from which to search out the way we should go and the work we should do. The Protestant churches are here for a purpose, of that we can be certain. So that even if we be small in numbers and weak in life we can learn the purpose for which God has put us here and serve it to the best of our strength.