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Middlesex Vicar of Homerton William Baird**

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**LAY HELP THE CHURCH'S
PRESENT NEED.**

A PAPER READ AT ST. MARY'S SCHOOLS,
WEST BROMPTON,

ON THE EVENING OF NOVEMBER 17TH, 1870.

BY WILLIAM BAIRD, M.A.

VICAR OF HOMERTON, MIDDLESEX.

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NOTICE.

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THIS paper is printed in obedience to the wishes of Lord Lawrence and others, who heard it. It was originally drawn up without any view to publication, and was read at more than one of the Conferences held in different parts of London under the auspices of the Diocesan Association of Lay-helpers. The writer could not but yield to the urgent request of those who asked him to print the paper, but at the same time he does so with a full consciousness of its defective and fragmentary character. Such as it is, he ventures to commend it to the charitable consideration of his fellow-churchmen, and trusts that it may, by God's blessing, be a means of promoting the practical good at which the revived organization of Lay-help aims.

The Vicarage, Homerton.
Nov. 1870.

THE NEED OF LAY HELP, AND HOW TO DRAW IT OUT.

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It is needless for me to enlarge on the vast importance of the subject which we are gathered together to consider to-night, for that importance is on all hands confessed. Differ as we may on other points, English Churchmen, Roman Catholics, and Protestant Dissenters feel equally that one of the great questions of our age is how to call out and to regulate Lay-help. It may be that in this recognition of a common want we may dimly discern the fact that, if ever the scattered portions of the Church are to be united in one, it must be not only on the basis of the common profession of abstract truth, however valuable such profession may be, but rather on the basis of common work for Christ. My object to-night, however, is not to set before you any mere speculations, but to put into shape some thoughts, which may be helpful to us in any work which we undertake for the glory of God and the good of His Church.

I believe you will find on reference to Ecclesiastical history that the most healthy periods of the Church's life have been those, in which there has been the largest development of Lay activity. The Apostolic Church was one great community of workers. True love to Christ found its vent in active ministries of love towards the suffering members of His spiritual Body, and in increased earnestness in carrying the message of salvation to perishing souls. Throughout the Apostolic age the link runs unbroken, "Epaphras our dear fellow-helper," "the beloved Persis, who laboured much in the Lord," "Euodias and Syntyche," though not always of the same mind, yet striving to forget their differences in a common work. "Clement and other fellow-workers whose names" were "in the Book of Life"—these and many another, whether ecclesiastic or lay-workers, whose names swell the goodly list of Apostolic greetings at the conclusion of each Epistle, show that the Early Church was a community of living workers striving to spread the faith of a living Lord, not only by words but by deeds. So in succeeding ages, whenever the Church's life was abundant, the principle of all helping in a common work was recognised. The early Christians in Rome were marked out from all other forms of so-called religion, because they had one peculiar superstition. They sought out the poor and ministered to their wants. The same practical characteristic will be discerned in every age of the Church's history. Independent of the more formal aspects of Lay-help represented by the Reader and the Deaconess, we shall find that in the Early Church after Apostolic days had passed there was a large band of willing workers ready in Christ's Name to do service to their brethren. Since that time every season of religious awakening has brought with it a quickening of the spirit of service. The religious confraternities of Vincent de Paul, the self-devoted labours of the Wesleyan local preachers, the good works of Hannah More, Elizabeth Fry, and Howard the philanthropist, are but varying features in the same great picture. The mode of action might be different, but the aim in view was essentially the same, and the spring of action in all these self-undertaken labours was the love of Christ in the heart of those who gave themselves. Only a short time ago I saw somewhere an account of a missionary meeting. One and another was asked what he or she could give to the cause of Christian Missions, and certain sums were promised. At last one young man rose at the end of the room. "What will you give?" said the president of the meeting. "Myself," was the laconic, but courageous reply. We want more of this spirit, and I think it is among the most hopeful signs of a far from hopeful age that there are many of our young men ready when the question is put, "What will you give to God?" to answer with an unflinching heart and unflinching tongue—"Myself."

While, however, I thankfully acknowledge the growth of this spirit of service, I do not think *all* sufficiently realize their responsibility. In religion we are fearfully apt to catch at a proxy when we can, and I can imagine some, to whom the very existence of a Diocesan Association of Lay-helpers may act as a sort of indirect excuse for doing nothing themselves. "There are *the* Lay-helpers of the diocese; they number 1000 and upwards. They undertake Lay-work, and I am quite content to let them represent the Lay element in Church works. If you want half-a-crown or five shillings, come to me; but don't ask me to leave my arm-chair after my Sunday's dinner to go and teach in a close school-room. Let these Lay-helpers, overlooked as they are sure to be most efficiently by the clergy" (for objectors of this kind are clad in an armour of impenetrable politeness and gracefully-fitting amiability)—"let them distribute our alms, but don't ask me to go up one of those dark creaking staircases—don't ask me to do violence to my nasal organs by sending me into a room which reeks with the combined perfume of soap-suds and beef-steak. My duty as a Churchman can never require this. I am an advocate for helping the poor, but this is going a little too far." Now there is a Book which it is the fashion to "handle freely" now-a-days, which seems to me to run entirely counter to the view which I have ventured to describe. I read there that "the Son of man . . . gave to every man his work" (St. Mark xiii. 34); and again an Apostle tells us, "Let every man prove his own work" (Gal. vi. 4); and in the last chapter of this same Book I find the saying, "Behold I come quickly; and My reward is with Me to give every man according as his work shall be" (Rev. xxii. 12). I merely give these as samples of the kind of teaching we get in Holy Scripture. Whether it is the Divine Master, or the busy practical Apostle of the Gentiles, or the rapt St. John who speaks—all tell us the same thing. With one consent they point "every man" to "his work." Oh! you who are doing nothing for Christ, ponder over those awful words of the last chapter of the last book of God—the latest message which has come from heaven to earth—"Behold I come quickly, and My reward is with Me to give every man according as his work shall be!" What then, if you have no work to show? what about the reward *then*, if there be not the work *now*?

Independently, however, of the high and solemn view of the vocation of Christian men to God's work, I want you to look at the whole matter from a practical business point of view. What should you think if you heard of a house of business, where all the work was done by the managers? or of a shop where all the selling was done by the master? or of an army where all the fighting was undertaken by the officers? or of a navy, where all the ship's work was done by those in command? You know well, that the very idea is too absurd to be entertained for one

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moment. Yet it is exactly the way in which you are acting about Christ's work in the National Church. A Church without a working laity is as great an absurdity as (nay from its essential constitution, a greater absurdity than) a shop without serving hands, a ship without a working crew, or an army without fighting soldiers.

The evil too is one which has avenged itself with a fearful power. Whence sprang the miserable notion, happily now passing away, that the Church consisted of the clergy alone? "From the arrogance of the priesthood" is the common answer. If I said, "From the apathy of an uninterested laity," I should be at least quite as near the mark. If the laity will not bear their share of the Church's burden, it follows as a necessary consequence that their place as counsellors is unrecognised; and then from the consequent elevation of the clergy and depression of the laity, results something very like a dislocation in the ecclesiastical body. There were some limbs broken in the last century and the early part of this, and it will take some time to set them, and make them serviceable again. A twofold difficulty has arisen from this violation of a primary law of church life. The clergy have a sort of lurking distrust of lay-help, and the laity are dissatisfied with their position. The clergy have been so unaccustomed to any help from the laity that the more conservative among them regard such help as a novelty to be introduced with great caution and surrounded by very definite safeguards. The laity on the other hand have been so unaccustomed to help that they either do too much or too little. They want sometimes to take the charge of the parish off the clergyman's shoulders altogether; sometimes they have such a pious horror of trenching upon the ministerial office that they are practically of little use. These difficulties however, though troublesome, are not insurmountable, and are rapidly disappearing as clergy and laity come to know each other better. I should scarcely have considered it necessary to refer to them, had not some of the laity confessed their dissatisfaction somewhat strongly at the Conference held at Sheffield in May 1869, under the presidency of the Archbishop of York—a Conference, the Report of which is well worth the study of any one interested in the lay-help movement. It would take too long to enter into the details of the various plans proposed, but one thing seems to be strongly felt—If the clergy give the laity work, they must also give them a voice as to the way in which that work is to be carried on. Theoretically the Vestry represents the voice of the laity, but no one will contend that it is an adequate representation, nor does it touch the particular points, on which an earnest lay-worker would wish to take counsel with his spiritual pastor. What we want (it seems to me) is a sort of Council of Communicants—a kind of Kirk-session in fact—to interchange thoughts and take counsel with the pastor. I am convinced that, until we have some organization of this kind, we shall have a constant repetition of those mistakes, which are often unwittingly made by the clergy from a non-appreciation of the honest difficulties of the laity. I cannot do more than touch this point, but I may perhaps be permitted to say that I pray to see the day, when the Bishop shall take counsel with his Presbyters in Diocesan Synod, and when each parish shall have its own little synod of communicants gathering around the parish priest. Then we shall have less jarring, and fewer mistakes.

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I must now consider shortly how we can draw out Lay-help. The best way to draw it out is simply to state why we want it. Beyond the claims which God's work must make upon the heart and conscience of every Christian man, "is there not a cause?" Take the large parish of Lambeth. "The census of 1851 gives the population as 139,325; the church accommodation as 22,589; that of dissent 11,586; but this includes the wealthier districts of Kennington, Norwood, Brixton, and Stockwell. Exclude these parts of the parish, and the provision for the teaching of the people is comparatively reduced, whilst the attendance is in an inverse ratio to the wealth. The poorer the place, the fewer the people who enter any place of worship . . . The census returns for Lambeth give one-third of the sittings as always empty; it would be more than this in the poorer parts of the parish." For this statement I am indebted to Canon Gregory, [11a] and I can only say, "Is there not a cause?" "In Southwark," says Dr. Hume, "there are 68 per cent. who attend no place of worship; in Lambeth 60½." This evidence was tendered on oath before the Lords' Committee on Church-rates. [11b] Lord Shaftesbury again calculates "that only about 2 in every 100 of the working *men* are found to attend any place of worship." I say again, looking at these awful facts, "Is there not a cause?"

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Now I ask you plainly, "Can you expect the 40 clergy of Lambeth (for that, according to the 'Clergy List,' is their number) to cope with this unassisted? What are the 23 clergy of Southwark to do unassisted among a population of whom 68 per cent. do not attend service?" In saying this I am not underrating the labours of Nonconformists; but while we thank God for the honest hearty work of many among them, we have no business to take that work into calculation, if we want thereby to lessen our responsibility as members of the *National* Church. Now you see the extent of the evil. How can it be remedied? By multiplying our bishops, no doubt, and providing more clergy in each parish. That will do good; but it will be of no avail without a working laity. If the working classes are to be brought to church, *you* must bring them; and once brought, *we* must keep them. I want to tell you *why* you must bring them, and *how* you must bring them. *You* must bring them, because many of them seem to think that we talk to them in a professional way; we are a sort of ecclesiastical barristers holding a brief for the Bible. It is an unjust estimate; but there are many unjust estimates in this world. Therefore we want laymen who will go from house to house—who will conduct prayer-meetings and Bible classes, and cottage lectures—who will come and say to the members of the classes alienated from the services of the sanctuary, "I come to tell you about the religion of Christ, because I have found it helpful to myself. I come to ask you to seek pardon from Him, because I have found it myself. I come to ask you to frame your life according to the Gospel of Christ, because I find it makes my own heart happy and my own

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life bright with the sunshine of God's love!" We want such helpers as these, and they *must* be laymen, and laymen of different classes. "I proceed . . .," writes an earnest clergyman, who worked at one time in Manchester, "to indicate what appears to me to be one of the greatest causes of the evils for which our large towns have gained such an unhappy notoriety. It is needless to say that I allude to the separation of classes—a gigantic wrong, to which it is not too much to say may be traced all the physical and moral degradation and spiritual destitution over which so many philanthropists lament, and for which so few seem prepared to offer a remedy."

[13] We want to "gather of every kind," to recruit from every class for the great army of Lay-helpers. Those who promote the work have no fear about this. Whatever God puts it into a man's heart to do, that let him do in due subordination to the Church's primary laws. Will you resist this call?

This brings me to another point—the necessity of giving "to every man his work." Each of our Lay-helpers should have his own definite work assigned. It never answers to stray over the whole field of possible work, and happily there is scope for every variety of natural temperament. One is fond of teaching—then there is the Sunday school and the night school. Another has from God the gift of exhortation—"let him wait on exhortation" in the Bible class and the prayer meeting. Another is "a son of consolation," and has the precious gift of tender sympathy for the needs and sufferings of others, and for him the sick-room and the home of poverty are the ground on which he has to do his battle for his Master. As a district visitor and an almoner there is plenty for him to do. Yet another has a very practical turn of mind, and likes "business" after "business hours," and for him the penny bank and the provident fund afford a scope for the exercise of those talents, which, equally with the others, he has received from God's hand. Thus, you see, there is scope for every one.

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A few words now about the value of the Diocesan Association as a connecting link among lay-helpers. We are all quite alive to the value of combinations in political and social affairs. That "union is strength," is a recognised maxim, except in religion, where, above all things, it is true. The Diocesan Association of Lay-helpers set out, if I mistake not, with a twofold purpose. It desired, as far as possible, to consolidate lay-help in the diocese, so that by united prayer, converse, and communion, those engaged in God's work in this great city might be brought face to face with one another. It desired also to *stimulate* and to *distribute* lay-work—to *stimulate* it by being able to show how many there were actually at work already—to *distribute* it, by sending the superfluous wealth of lay-help in a well-ordered wealthy parish, to supplement the poverty and the difficulties of the destitute districts. In its work of consolidating and stimulating, we may thank God that the Association has met with a fair measure of encouragement. The work of distribution has proved one of greater difficulty. I am, however, very far from being without hope that it may be compassed in greater degree, when the needs of the East-end and the poor transpontine parishes are more widely known. The Twelve Days' Mission brought us some help from educated laymen in suburban districts, and I can not only testify personally to the value of that help, but I am thankful to say, that in more than one case it has established a link which it would take a great power to sunder. The real aim of our Association then is to put earnest laymen in the way of getting work by giving them, on their first arrival in London, introductions to clergymen in need of help. It attempts no restraint on the parish priest. It merely offers you the privilege of feeling that in your work you are at one with the chief pastor of your diocese, and that you have the comfort of knowing that he prays for and sanctions your work. In a less degree, it is the same blessing which the clergy have from Episcopal supervision, and with you, as with us, if rightly valued, will act as a bond of union.

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Before concluding, let me say that I believe this to be one of the most important ecclesiastical movements of modern times. It is occupying the thoughts of some of the most distinguished clergymen and laymen of our day, and formed the subject of the prayer of the Archbishop of this province, when he lay upon what we then feared was the bed of death. The next few years will probably see the question, whether we are to continue the National Church of this land, fought out in our legislature. If we make good our claim, it will not be by the *prestige* of our historical position or by the associations of the past. It will be by the living work of the present that we must elect to be tested, and if our laity realise their responsibility in time, I firmly believe that all will yet be well. Remember, however, that our present proportion of lay-workers is miserably small, and that every lay-helper has need not only to work himself, but to be a kind of missionary to persuade others to work—a recruiting sergeant for the great army, which comes "to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty." Not only must we all, clergy and laity, work, but we must say that, God being our helper, we will not rest till every churchman, whatever his social position, feels that he has a responsibility, a work and a stake in our National Church.

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NOTE.—I cannot resist calling the reader's attention to the following words of my friend the Rev. W. D. Maclagan, in his essay in *The Church and the Age* (Murray).

"The Associations and Unions, Guilds and Confraternities, Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods, which are springing up every day, are surely not only testimonies to a great truth so long forgotten, that every member of the Body of Christ has its special powers and special duties, but also preparation for the recognition and realisation of another truth equally ignored, that the Church itself ought really to be one vast Association of Lay-helpers, one glorious Brotherhood and Sisterhood, combined in one, one great Confraternity of Faith, Hope, and Love, labouring together with Christ in the

FOOTNOTES

[11a] See “Sermons on the Poorer Classes of London, preached before the University of Oxford,” by Robert Gregory, M.A., Canon of St. Paul’s, and Vicar of St. Mary the Less, Lambeth.

[11b] “Only one-sixth of the population of London attend Church.”—*Christian at Work (N. Y. Paper) Dec.* 1869. Such is the American estimate of our religion.

[13] Huntington’s “Church Work in our large Towns,” p. 13.

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