Editorial

Whatever may be the eventual assessment of the results of the London Mission, there appears to be general agreement that its immediate effect was to bring much-needed encouragement to the clergy and to the regular worshippers in the diocese. To many, it was an experience as refreshing as it was unusual, and indeed surprising, to find themselves for a whole week in a crowded church, even if it was not the church which they habitually attend. Mission congregations appear to have consisted, to a large extent, of those who were already church members, though the interest of a considerable number of outsiders was aroused and there was the promise of plenty of work to be done in following up the Mission. It is to be hoped that the people thus newly interested will be permanently drawn into the Church and that they will reinforce congregations that in many cases have been bravely struggling on against heavy odds. Otherwise the Mission might in the end leave more discouragement than encouragement behind it. If an enterprise organized with so much imagination and efficiency left things more or less where they were, it might be inferred that the Church is confronted with a hopeless task, about which nothing effective can be done.

That inference would not, however, be warranted. The question then to ask would be whether the best evangelistic strategy for the Church in this age is that which was followed in this particular Mission. It is well to ask the question, anyhow, since provincial cities may be inclined to follow the example of London. Would it not be true to say that the London Mission was of a type that is familiar enough, and that what distinguished it from previous missions in this country were the facts that it was planned on a diocesan scale and that it was carried through with remarkably up-to-date techniques of publicity, etc.? It will be judged to have been a success if a considerable number of individuals have been converted and drawn into existing congregations.

As was pointed out in an article entitled “Towards the Conversion of France,” in THEOLOGY, January, 1947, the Church in France is adopting a different evangelistic strategy. Fuller information about this is now available in English; see, for example, France Pagan? by Maisie Ward (Sheed and Ward, 10s. 6d.), and Revolution in a City Parish by G. Michonneau (Blackfriars, 7s. 6d.). The following considerations seem to lie behind the strategy of the Mission de France and the Mission de Paris. The evangelization of the unchurched masses in contemporary society must be envisaged as a task for generations; it is not one in which quick results are to be expected. The atmosphere in which people live and work and play
is "pagan," not in the original sense of that word, but in the sense that it is foreign to the Christian spirit, indifferent to the Christian creed, and careless of the demands of the Christian moral code. It is the whole social atmosphere that needs to be changed, unless we are playing with words when we speak, for instance, of the evangelization of a city. The present aim, therefore, should be not merely to pull a few individuals out of their present social groups, which are divorced from the Church, and to incorporate them in the Church, leaving the social groups where they were. The aim should be to penetrate, slowly but surely, whole groups and to christianize societies, thus providing a Christian atmosphere and a corporate Christian life where individuals can grow up into Christ in their own natural setting. In the early stages, and perhaps for a long time, evangelism of this kind has to be hidden and advertised and the witness that is borne to the Lord has to be indirect and exceedingly patient. This new type of evangelism requires the training of a new type of evangelist. Men will be able to work for Christ in what will generally seem at first to be spiritual deserts, only if they are themselves equipped with strong spiritual resources as well as with an intelligent hold on their creed and its bearings.

It would be a mistake to suggest that methods that are appropriate in France or in Paris should be slavishly followed in England or in London. All the same, we suspect that there may be more salutary instruction and also more encouragement to be derived from the Mission de Paris than from the Mission to London. The absence of anti-clericalism in England makes it less needful that there should be an influx of priest-workmen into our factories; but it would be a step forward if we could have a few more experiments in equipping lay Christians for evangelistic work that will have to be done for the most part outside the confines of the visible Church and about which it will not be possible for a long time to come to produce reports that can be presented to ecclesiastical assemblies.

The ecumenical movement may be able to help the churches in different countries to learn from one another's experiences. It is lamentable that the Christian News-Letter has had to suspend publication. One of its last numbers (No. 337, May 11, 1949) dealt with the subject of "Industrial Evangelism." It has, during the ten years of its existence, done an invaluable work both in disseminating reliable information and in offering wise guidance about all the great questions that confront Christians as they look out into the world to-day.