Experience in Depth

A MINISTER'S WIFE WRITES . . .

In the June issue of Pastoral Psychology the articles were devoted to small groups in the church. Robert Leslie mentioned some of these groups, among them, Sequoia Seminar. I have been working in these groups for many years. I am an active wife of a Lutheran chaplain. What follows is a subjective account of one of these seminars which I attended.

Reality is what we called God when the retreat began. Reality, because no other term was acceptable to all members. We were twenty adults in the beautiful Santa Cruz mountains, gathered for two weeks of intensive study of the life and teachings of Jesus; to pull together conceptions we had been living with for many years, some of them effectively, and others either ineffectively or destructively. In these weeks we were to live together in an unusually close physical and, later, spiritual relationship. Through these days we realized real and deep communion with one another and with God. Love such as many had never known before was here communicated.

Expressive of our purpose, the lodge in which we met was open and light, its structure pointing toward the mountains, up and out. Designed to utilize “used” lumber, it was a structure of new beauty, symbolic of what occurred in old lives that found renewal and beauty through Christ and his teachings. Sequoia Seminar is the name of the group and thus it is set up, as a seminar where adults meet and discuss openly together. Geared to an opening intellectual approach, and attempting to satisfy the whole man in relation to his religion, it reaches professional people, many of whom have been unable to relate themselves to a church because for them it symbolizes arbitrary authority, judgmentalism, and a projection of themselves. So many of our church congregations aim at increasing membership and have become so large that we have gotten away from the individual and the sincere searching study of Jesus, our teacher, whom we would follow.

Individuals came to study and examine the life of Jesus, many hopeful that herein were the answers for life. In the group were people practiced in the
ways of intellectual reasoning; people who must examine and re-examine issues before accepting them. Confessed one member of the group, “I have had intellectual insights into the meaning of the words ‘to live’ for some time . . . but this is the first time that the true meaning of these concepts has come to me on a feeling level, and the impact is powerful. Intellectual concepts seem dry and brittle compared with the tremendous discoveries in feeling I have made here . . . There is the wonderful feeling of being loved and accepted as I am and of being able to know others as they are.” There were, among us, engineers, businessmen, young mothers, a Lutheran pastor and myself (his wife), teachers, a television script writer and producer, and a lawyer—each of us with a well built facade to fit our role and with seeming self-assurance that would fit a well-adjusted personality.

Because it is known that the individual cannot lose himself unless he can be free of himself, much of the time was given to our personal and individual problems. The group was structured to create an attitude of acceptance of each individual. The leadership offered understanding, loving acceptance, and encouraged this atmosphere among us. Each one’s ideas were considered worthwhile and all listened and tried to withhold judgment. This stimulated participation and gave encouragement to each of us to express what we believed no matter how bizarre we might have feared it to be. It seems to me we often reject people in our churches by rejecting their ideas and thus preclude the possibility of relating persons to God through Christ and his Church.

We welcomed opportunity to examine and question without censor. Words were defined and re-defined many times before the group could agree on acceptable working definitions. Increasingly, members began to examine the subtle motivations often at cross purposes beneath our dogmatism, stereotypes, and prejudices. The tendency to identify with our ideas became clear to us in the beginning of the retreat. We needed to remind ourselves and one another that we are not our idea; that our value does not lie in what we think. In this atmosphere we were able to express bizarre and unique ideas that heretofore we had not been willing to share.

It seemed the Holy Spirit was at work in one young man’s life as he struggled with commitment. He was defensive throughout the study, and at the conclusion of the two weeks said, “I have made no commitment as yet. This cannot be a Billy Graham type of action. It must be done after perhaps months of sober contemplation. Yet, once it is done there must be no looking back, and the willingness to refuse retrospection is the most difficult decision I know.”

As the first week began, it was as though each of us were fenced off from the other, our fences neatly set before us, protecting and isolating us. As was aptly stated, “It is as though a coat of armor enclosed each of us. In order for anyone to get through he must employ an infinite amount of patience and persistence to chip away a small portion of the armor and get through to the real person.” The fences came down and the armor came off as the week progressed. Before the end of the retreat, we were finding that behind the neat facade lay real people. “One of the greatest things I have learned at this retreat,” said a member, “is that all people are real people. I am used to thinking this, even to saying it, but I have never felt it quite so