

4/8/59 *England's Worker Priests and Laymen Discuss their Problems*

AN unusual group of priests and laymen, with their wives and families, recently held a conference at the Vicarage in Harlington, Bedfordshire. All the men there, clergy and lay, have chosen to be wage-earners in industry and receive no regular stipend from the Church. The group is in no way an organized movement, but its members find it helpful to meet to discuss common problems, and hope that, in time, others of the same vocation may join them.

The member of the group with the longest experience of manual work is a Canadian layman, Mr. Tom Waldon, who works at present as a packer in a tobacco factory in East London. A graduate of the University of British Columbia, he did five years labouring in Canada before coming to England in 1953; he is now a shop steward and an active trade-unionist.

44-HOUR-WEEK IN ENGINEERING FACTORY

Another shop steward was the host of the conference. He is the Rev. John Strong, who combines his duties as parish priest of Harlington with working a 44-hour-week in an engineering factory in Luton. Before 1955 he spent twelve years as a full-time parish priest, and nearly four years as a worker-priest in the Kent mining village of Eythorne. The only income he receives from the Church covers the business expenses of running his parish.

The Rev. Martyn Grubb, who is the son of Sir Kenneth Grubb, was the third to start independently in this work. After leaving Cambridge University, he and his wife worked for five years in factories in Southall, Middlesex; after one year's ordination training and eighteen months' full-time parish work, they are now back in Southall with their three children.

The only "skilled" man in the group is the Rev. John Wilcox, a fitter in a wire-working firm in Warrington.

He served an apprenticeship in marine engineering and worked as a staff-planner before training for ordination at King's College, London. Very conscious of the rift between the ordinary factory worker and the Church, he returned to manual work, and was later ordained; after two years as a worker-priest he will spend two years in full-time parish work.

The Rev. Tom Quigley also works in industry in the north of England. After thirteen years as an Army chaplain he is now a curate in Carlisle, and works on double-day shift-work in a factory.

The second layman at the conference, Mr. Tony Williamson, hopes to be ordained next year, when he will continue as a tractor-driver in the motor industry in Oxford, where he has worked since leaving Cuddesdon. His father, the Rev. J. Williamson, is an East End incumbent.

The Rev. John Rowe, an electrician's labourer in a brewery in Stepney, is from British Guiana and is the son of the Archdeacon of Demerara. He has been a curate in Cambridge and in East London, where he is still attached to staff of St. Paul's, Bow Common. The Rowe and Waldon families, each with three children, live together in Stepney, sharing their income and attending Holy Communion together before work nearly every day.

ALL HAVE FULL SUPPORT OF BISHOPS

All have the support of their bishops, but the extent to which members of the group are committed to official parish work varies; several are also active in trade unions, the Labour Party, and other activities, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Although one earns over £13 a week, the average wage of the group, on a normal week, is under £11. Two have been manual workers for more than ten years, and two more for over five years.

The basic reason for living in this way is that each feels this to be his way to perform his part in reducing the gap between industrial wage-earners and the Church, but none feels this is the only way, or that this is the only task facing the Church to-day.

England's Worker-Priests

"I want to be with ordinary people, share their lives and be one of them," says tough, square-jawed John Strong, 43. For years he has lived in slums, worked in factories. To most Church of England clerics he is an odd fellow, "honest but peculiar." Reason: Worker Strong is also a fulltime minister.

In his tiny Bedfordshire village of Harlington (pop. 750) last week, Anglican Strong met four other ministers who also work fulltime in factories, issued a formal statement ("No movement or organization has been created. We do not want to become rigid"). But in the view of all five, such a movement is the Church of England's best hope for re-kindling religious spirit (only one-tenth of England's 27 million Anglicans attended services last Easter Sunday, the day of top turnout). British workers, explains Strong, see the church as "a financial racket. Churches are empty now, but the Church still has income from investments. If empty churches meant hard times for vicars, then they would soon do something about it."

Middlesex-born Vicar Strong first took up his double life during World War II, when he served a village near Dover as vicar and simultaneously worked as a coal-field pitman. Hampered by unenthusiastic superiors and sheer exhaustion, Strong had to quit for a while, but in 1955 he took a job as an oil-meter checker in a factory, was appointed curate in Harlington, and won the backing of his bishop.

Refusing the \$2,100 stipend allotted him by the church, John Strong supports his wife and two children on his \$28 weekly factory pay (plus overtime). He usually officiates in his overalls at Communion before scurrying to catch a 6:50 train to work, spends lunchtime visiting the sick or talking to fellow workers, rushes home at 5:30 for parish work and sermon-writing. To the four other worker-priests, such a schedule is too rough; they only help out as assistant vicars when needed.

Possibly remembering the Roman Catholic Church's ill-fated worker-priest movement in France, the Church of England is still wary of the idea. "This is a waste of skilled manpower," says Dr. Leslie Hunter, Bishop of Sheffield. Strong's retort: "Many people regard the Church as something apart. In my own way I am trying to dispel that attitude." One proof of his success: Strong was elected by his fellow workers to be shop steward of the Amalgamated Engineering Union.