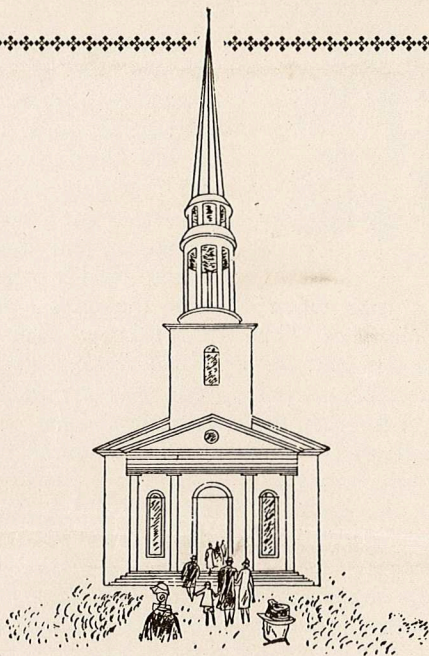
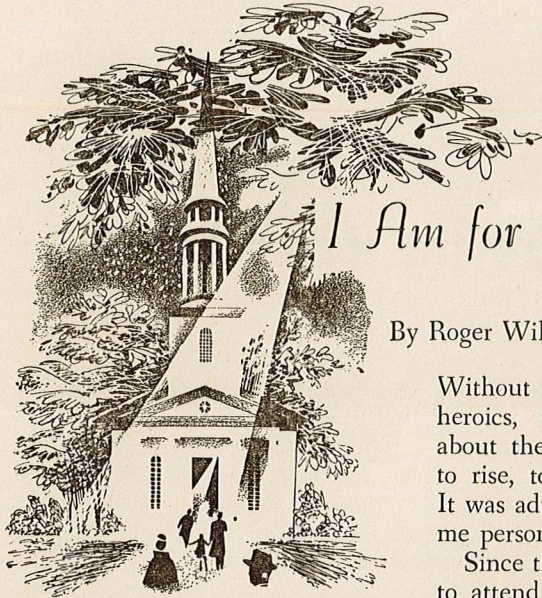

I Am for the Churches

BY ROGER WILLIAM RIIS



Reprinted from The Reader's Digest, December, 1951

Report on a satisfying
spiritual quest.



I Am for the Churches

By Roger William Riis

Without a trace of sanctimonious heroics, he conversed informally about the insistent demand of life to rise, to grow, to improve itself. It was adult, it was spiritual; and to me personally it was helpful.

Since then I have made it a point to attend and study churches — all kinds. And I state with assurance that the critics of churches today don't know what they are talking about. True, a minority of churches still offer a dull, repellent form of salvation, some in ugly buildings, some with painful music, some with humdrum ministers. But you don't have to go to those churches, nor need you condemn all churches because some fail.

It is obvious that the assailants of churches do not go to church. They don't know what the churches are doing these days. They don't know that the average minister is a more interesting, better-informed man than most of the critics.

I am for the churches because they have something for me, and something for civilization. A great minister said: "Let God be thanked

THERE WAS a time when I scoffed at the churches. Then one day during the last war, on a sudden whim, I attended a service — for the first time in 22 years. And what did the church offer me? A simple, reverent service, featured by a sermon on "Peter, the Rock," on the permanence and beauty of the church.

I found that I was acutely interested in hearing about anything that had permanence, beauty and unselfish endeavor. It fell on my spirit like water on a desert, and I went out stirred and grateful.

A week later I took my curiosity to another church, and heard the minister — in a singularly lovely building — talk simply and beautifully on "The Ascending Life."

there is on earth an institution that has a high opinion of man, declaring that he is in some sense a son of God, who has within himself divine possibilities; an institution that transcends race, nation and class; an institution which is loyally undertaking to embody the spirit of Christ, and in His name to relieve human suffering, promote human welfare and carry on a ministry of reconciliation among men."

I find myself unable any longer to answer that kind of platform with "I'd rather go into the woods and worship alone. Many of the clergy are dull, concerned over trivial taboos. Sunday is my day for loafing."

Countless times I have found in church something which lifted my spirit. That, I now believe, was what I unconsciously sought. The churches' varied social activities mean little or nothing to me. But others find social outlets in church work. So much the better; they get what they seek, and so do I.

New York's beautiful Church of the Ascension has great wooden doors which open outward, but they are carved on the inside because they are never closed. Every year, 30,000 persons slip in for quiet meditation. They get what they seek.

When you go to church you should actively seek something. You must not go like an empty bucket, waiting passively to be filled. When you go to a movie you take at least

a hopeful, sympathetic attitude. That's the least you should bring to a church.

Why is one church a power in its community, while others are not? The personality of the clergyman is the most important reason. Churches are human institutions, clergymen are human beings and they are not all great spiritual leaders. But when they are — and they are often — they manage to make your relations with God an astonishingly practical, useful, alluring thing.

The clergyman himself is the real factor in a church, much more important than architecture or music or furnishings. Most sermons are surprisingly good, and useful. It has been said that no one can deliver a vital address as often as a cleric must. But why miss the many vital addresses he does deliver? It is said that sermons are remote from world affairs. Yet half those I have heard interpreted world affairs from the Christian viewpoint. A third of them were concerned exclusively with Gospel teachings.

Successful churches are those whose clergymen set forth uncompromising Christianity, sticking closest to Christ's very difficult but challenging teaching. That is the great asset of the church. The more vigorously a church proclaims it, the more people respect and follow that church.

What I like most about going to church is that it turns one's attention, willy-nilly, to higher things for at least a little while each week.

MOORE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE LIBRARY



3 2042 10102559 5

Man does *not* live by bread alone; he requires cultivation of his spirit. Even when I have wandered into a church where the minister was dull, the music bad, the interior ugly, I have been compelled by my very presence there to think about things loftier than my daily affairs. Even if you differ with what a minister says, you have to listen to him and organize your opposing reasons, and that's good for you. I know it is good for me.

In a world haunted by violence, churches do their very best to represent the spirit. I am warmly grateful for that. Significantly, the two governments which in my lifetime have been officially anti-church are the governments of Nazism and Communism. In nations where the spirit of man is free, churches flourish as men turn toward God.

It may be that the democratic way will not finally overcome the tyrannical way until and unless the democracies somehow crusade under the banner of the church. How can we defeat the destructive dynamics of Communism unless we employ the constructive dynamics of the spirit?

William Penn said, "Men must be governed by God or they will be ruled by tyrants." The world for a quarter century has been his witness.

"To love God," said a beloved minister, "is to believe, despite every appearance to the contrary, that slavery, war and crippling poverty can be banished from the

earth, and that conditions favorable to the highest development of the human spirit can be created."

That is extraordinarily practical Christianity. In fact, I cannot distinguish it from the democratic ideal in action. Believing that, I can no longer say that I would rather do my worshipping alone, that Sunday is my day for loafing.

It is an exciting spiritual adventure, this going to church. Try it. Pay no attention to denomination while you investigate. Just out of the curiosity you owe your spiritual health, explore a little. You will almost certainly find, in every community, one church that will give you what *you* want, even though you cannot put that want into words.

Whether or not we realize it, each of us has a personal spiritual quest. It is the most important thing we should be about, and it is only ourselves we cheat if we ignore it. In this, of all ages, it is time we pushed that quest. I have found the churches a good place to pursue it. If they offered nothing but that, they should now be upheld by all men of intelligence and good will.

Reprints of this article, which should encourage church attendance, are available at the following prices, post-paid to one address: 10-1/3; 50-5/6; 100-10/6; 500-£2/15/-; 1000-£5/-/-.

Address Reprint Editor, The Reader's Digest Association Pty. Ltd., Box 5020, G.P.O., Sydney.