

# forum

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*The Nondialogue Between Extension and the Church.*  
If the Extension worker were to seek out the institution in American communities that has the most in common with Cooperative Extension itself, that institution might be the church. Anticipating thunderous disagreement, some hasty analyses are in order. First, the church has a general philosophy that (while spiritual) is centrally educational. Further, it's organized on a voluntary and cooperative pattern with few professional or paid workers compared to its large clientele.

Concerns for agriculture, family, youth, and community are central to the church tradition since biblical times and tend to be surprisingly futuristic in focus. While Cooperative Extension is reported to be the world's largest public non-formal adult education organization, the church constitutes the largest collective cooperator and client potential for Extension education in America, and it's already organized for the task. Think about it. In many ways, the basic notions of Extension and evangelism are interchangeable.

The obvious question, then, must be why there is so little Extension programming being done through the church or, conversely, why the church has been such an infrequent

clientele for Cooperative Extension. Specialists and field faculty have explored the question in the Pacific Northwest both philosophically and experientially over several months and the dilemma becomes more complex as time passes. It may, however, be an appropriate moment for the Extension worker and *Journal* reader to formulate some thought on this perplexing matter as it now stands.

The strong likelihood is that most Extension field faculty haven't seriously explored the potential of the church as cooperator, program vehicle, or direct clientele. Commodity groups, irrigation/conservation districts, Homemakers Clubs, 4-H Clubs, and community planners must certainly outdistance the church as viable targets for Extension programs at the present time.

It's also suspected that the church rather seldom seeks out Cooperative Extension faculty as resource people for church instruction in most communities, even though many church programs fit very nicely into Extension's domain of expertise. It has been said that the notion of separation of church and state is so strong that it dominates the very program philosophy of both institutions. Perhaps, but lack of mutual discovery seems a more plausible theory.

Some maintain that American ecumenism peaked in the 60s and that the late 70s were witness to a reentrenchment into denominational and nonsecular campgrounds. They say that the return to scripture has eclipsed religious secularism and social theology, and that the growth of conservative Christianity, fundamentalism, charismatic movements, and even orthodox Judaism are evidence of that phenomenon. Concern for the soul, they add, has displaced social involvement.

Yet, across the land one reads or hears of church-sponsored family retreats, parenting schools, consumerism workshops, outreach clubs, singles groups, and crisis programs . . . to say nothing of gardening, foods, clothing, and youth activities. Thus, one wonders if the nonsecular argument is truly valid in today's church.

Finally, there's the point of view that tries to explain that denominational directives come from on high and that local congregations either lag behind in adopting popular concerns of national scope or, conversely, tend to react to local circumstances and conditions regardless of national direction. Given the dozens of denominations and thousands of congregations in America, the truth of that viewpoint appears doomed to persistent cloudiness.

The essence of the problem thus remains. Extension knows neither the potential nor the position of the institutional

church as a partner in the nonformal education of the people of America. The church knows not of the potential resourcefulness and willingness of Cooperative Extension as they relate to the secular education programmed by the many churches. Both don't know that they're simultaneously concerned about agriculture, family, youth, and community and that both educate to those concerns along separate and sometimes parallel roads. And the nondialogue continues.