

THE STUDENT INTERRACIAL MINISTRY: A
VENTURE OF FAITH by Roger L. Shinn

Prof. Christian Ethics, U.T.S.

Last summer students from twelve theological seminaries, scattered from New England to Texas, entered into an adventure of faith and service. The fifteen students became associate pastors for the summer in churches of twelve cities in eight states. One element was the same in every situation: the student was entering a ministry in a church of a different race from his own.

I.

Three years ago the Student Interracial Ministry was a dream-- a foolish dream, said some of its critics. Now it is a reality--still experimental, still exploratory, still advancing a step at a time in faith, but a movement with genuine achievements. The 32 students who have entered this ministry have found unforgettable experiences of brotherhood in Christ breaking down barriers of stubborn sin. Churches, whether in Mississippi or New England, have reached a new awareness of the meaning of the body of Christ. Communities have seen evidence of Christian faith that have jarred their complacent assumptions.

In the typical pattern a white theological student shares in the ministry of a Negro church or a Negro student enters into the ministry of a white church. (This vocabulary of "Negro churches" and "white churches" is unchristian, but for the time being it is useful.) The ministry is often interdenominational and may be international, as when an English Presbyterian served in a Negro Baptist Church in Memphis. It may be humorously confusing, as when a Chinese-American wondered whether, in his life among Negroes, he was conforming to segregation or resisting it.

The student ministers undertook their responsibilities without many precedents or guidelines. Their one assurance was that they went and found welcome as ministers in Christ's church. Going alone or with wives and children, they entered into the life of the local church, serving as they were needed. They went to meetings (one inescapable part of any pastor's life), they preached the Gospel,

they taught in church schools and vacation Bible schools, they helped in youth programs, they made pastoral calls, they worked in church administration, they engaged in community activities.

II.

The Student Interracial Ministry is a student project through and through. Students got the idea, pushed it, did the major work, and carried out the ministry. Along the way many other people got involved. The students sought counsel from teachers and specialists in race relations. The National Council of Churches through its Department of Racial and Cultural Relations "adopted" the project but never interfered with student initiative. Dr. J. Oscar Lee of the New York office and the Rev. Will Campbell of the Nashville office gave constant help. Money came from individuals, local churches and youth fellowships, one philanthropic foundation, and some of the major denominations. The Inter-seminary Movement shared in the early plans and is now assuming a more active participation. But all along the way students themselves were the ones who broke fresh ground and cultivated it.

In the spring of 1960, three students from Union Theological Seminary in New York, getting acquainted with students from the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, saw the possibility of joint ministries. The white students joined the Negroes in their summer pastorates--and the pilot project was underway. The familiar words of theology and sociological theory took on flesh in the ministry of the Word who became flesh in Jesus Christ. The first summer's experience vindicated the project so thoroughly that there could be no question about carrying on.

In the following two years the Ministry grew. Students from Union, Yale, Drew, and Interdenominational Theological Centers took part in the planning. The demands of efficiency and a modest budget meant that most of the work had to be done by those who could meet together often in New York, but the horizons kept widening. The meetings were remarkable affairs. Even

1EK80.DIA

in the midst of drudgery--for any such project has its dull routines--there was an undercurrent of excitement. Planned sessions combined the most urgent prayer, discussions of scripture and theology, scheming to raise money, assignments of responsibilities for answering the mail. Volunteers, though busy with examinations and field work, carried the load. It was not easy for volunteers to coordinate the work of volunteers, so a helpful recent step has come in the appointment of a student co-ordinator, who is himself a veteran of the Student Interracial Ministry and who carried this responsibility as his regular field work assignment. The participation of the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations of the Inter-Seminary Movement help to provide organizational stability without inhibiting the spontaneous vigor that have been the genius of the project.

III.

Among the many notable aspects of the Student Interracial Ministry, four deserve special comment here.

1. SIM is above all else a ministry. The participants are not one-cause zealots or righteous warriors who go forth to battle the wicked. They know themselves as sinners who, in response to Christ, seek to participate in his ministry of reconciliation. In that ministry some of them have been threatened. Several have become controversial figures in local communities. One (out of the 32) has been slugged. But they have not gone as demonstrators or agitators. Their mission does not imply rejection of movements for social change. Some of them have on other occasions participated in demonstrations. And when their ministry to a congregation means sharing in the struggles of churchmen, they share. But always their decisions are made in the light of their ministry.

2. To an older observer SIM has shown a remarkable combination of youthful enthusiasm with wise maturity. To use a risky word, SIM might be called a crusade without trumpets or illusions. Here are students seeking to serve Christ with imagination and vigor; yet they are alert to the dangers of messianic complexes, of self-righteous pride, of condescending

paternalism. Steeped in scripture and contemporary theology, they know pitfalls of moral idealism. But they know also the demand of Christ for obedience.

3. Those who undertake interracial ministries see the need both for careful preparation and for improvisation. Knowing the perils of ignorance, they study the literature of the social sciences and Christian social action. They are canny enough to arrange health insurance for participants. They go to preparatory conferences where they learn from experienced leaders and seek through role-playing to anticipate possible experiences. But they also know (perhaps from the Acts of the Apostles) that the Christian must count on the Holy Spirit to tell him what to say in situations that cannot be calculated in advance. In solely human terms each man is on his own--knowing others whom he may write or telephone, but taking responsibility for his decisions within the fellowship of the local church where he works.

4. For many a participant SIM has offered a union of education and witness. The student ministers confess that they have come to know themselves, to understand the ties of Christian faith, to share in the lives of other people in a far more intense way than ever before. They come to understand the church better than in conventional field work. They cross the foolish barriers of race more meaningfully than in the briefer activities of picket lines or sit-ins. They taste the struggles and joys of shared ministry.

No-one can measure the consequences, past and future, of SIM. It is certain that many people have found their lives deepened and changed by it. Its "alumni," pastors of interracial churches and of more conventional churches, are continuing their ministries of reconciliation. The diaries and records of the participants belong to the primary sources of American church history in these years of our Lord.