

A White Minister Reports

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Raleigh, North Carolina, was host to three Student Interracial Ministry students in the summer of 1962, the second straight year that churches in the city have participated. One of the students was a Negro, who served as an assistant in The United Church. The Rev. S. Collins Kilburn reports:

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During the past two summers we have had in Raleigh, N.C., five S.I.M. students, two of them with our church. Each student finished his assignment with a feeling of deep satisfaction and gratitude. The churches involved have also been highly pleased and grateful for the project. Why such enthusiasm? Churches are not always happy with their student workers, and students do not invariably find summer field work so gratifying. What is the secret? Let me try to tell you.

Abraham Heschel has said that religion is on the wane not because it has become refuted by modern science, but because religion itself has become innocuous and dull. All of us are familiar with the picture. The churches are in "suburban captivity", bogged down in mimeographed sheets, fellowship suppers, membership campaigns, financial crusades, children's days, and committee meetings -- all out of touch with the real problems of the day. The sins of the modern church are its isolation from life, its tired blood, and its attachment to boredom.

In contrast S.I.M. is exciting. It has to do with reality. It is a pioneering venture. It ploughs open some of the dry, parched ground, and brings fresh soil to the surface.

Protestant churches in every part of the country are racially homogeneous, with very few exceptions. The gulf between white and Negro Christians is wide, and seldom bridged by local congregations. This is true even where the official policy is that of inclusiveness. Example: our church has had a clearly declared policy of open membership for twelve years, but thus far we have had only one Negro member. And we are not located in a white suburb! The point of these observations is simply that the S.I.M. student is really moving into a new world. He is engaged in a frontier thrust. He is doing something which has hardly been done before. And whatever else may happen, the student will not be bored and he will not come out of the experience unchanged as a person.

More important, the S.I.M. student can be certain that he is doing something that matters in the world and in the eyes of God. By his very presence he is making a dramatic witness to the Lordship of Christ, and he is helping a local congregation make the gospel visible. For the civic community and for other churches in the area this witness may be in the form of a disturbance. S.I.M. mediates a word of judgment on segregated churches and a segregated society. Within the church he is serving, however, the student's witness will take the form of reconciliation and renewal. The presence of the student reminds the church
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that the "tie that binds" is something deeper than human affinities. He gives the congregation a chance to learn experientially what it may already know intellectually about Christian fellowship. And, because of his different background he may bring to the attention of the congregation some aspect of the gospel which it has neglected.

Some of the values of the program to the student come in the area of practical skills and orientation to the pastoral ministry. Normally students do some preaching, some youth work, some adult education, some planning and organization. Usually the student will work closely with the senior minister, and hopefully there is something to be learned by observing, helping, and conversing with a more mature pastor. And when the minister takes his vacation, the student gets the experience of being in charge of the church for two weeks or a month.

The most significant values of the work, however, come to the student through interpersonal relationships. Our students have lived in some of the homes of the congregation, have shared meals in many other homes, and have visited freely in yet many others. The students get to know us as people. They become acquainted with our weaknesses. They learn not just about the race problem, but about human problems: loneliness, alienation, fear. And we, in turn, come to know the student not just as a seminarian on a race relations project, not just as a representative of another group, but as a person with needs and sins not so different from our own. Dialogue on the personal level breaks down stereotypes on both sides, and real human contact is achieved. Often hidden hostility and fear emerge. But when this happens in the community of faith, it is the opportunity for deeper reconciliation.

There is an element of personal risk for the student. Sometimes there is physical danger if the activity is in Alabama or Mississippi. But more often the risk is spiritual and psychological. How am I supposed to act? What am I expected to do? Will I be accepted? These questions which we ask as we enter any social relationship become especially urgent and anxious as the student enters the strange, new world of his S.I.M. assignment. It takes faith and the grace of God to risk your ego in this manner. But personal growth, indeed salvation itself, takes place through taking such risks. We find ourselves by venturing into the unknown.