

Words from a Negro Pastor

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A second SIM student in Raleigh served in the Davie Street Presbyterian Church, where J. Oscar McCloud is the minister. Rev. McCloud had participated in the Student Interracial Ministry as a student pastor the previous summer, following his graduation from seminary. In this article, Rev. McCloud discusses some of the problems and benefits of SIM from his ~~dual~~ experience as student and pastor:

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At a time when the agony of the Christian Church, especially in the South, continues, and churches in Macon, Georgia, in Oxford, Mississippi, and in New York suburbs, are still irrelevant, there appears a sparkle of hope through what has come to be known as the Student Interracial Ministry. This program, as I see it, offers to both seminary students and churches an opportunity to be true to their faith and principles, or to abandon them by seeking to do what seems less risky and more expedient for the time.

A Baptist minister in one southern city expresses the dilemma confronting the church and the minister in these words: "To proclaim at all the real, demanding, disturbing Gospel of God is not easy in the best of times-- it was quite as disturbing in the first century as now. Our current unrest and upheaval in every realm; the growing view by the observing world [and by some of the church's own youth] that the church is irrelevant with its platitudes and fiddle-faddle of much activism; and the realization that human relations in whose welfare Christ is vitally concerned have unmasked our shallow spiritual grasp of the true witness. These and other thorny affairs make the requirements of preaching an almost impossible assignment. In it all, the preacher cannot please God and man. Often he pleases neither. But the choice of masters must be made."

A student participating in the Student Interracial Ministry certainly makes this choice of masters. In the South, the liberal white, whether he be native or not, is still an unpopular minority as far as the majority community is concerned. A white servant, serving a Negro church, chooses not to be an intimate part of the white community. He chooses to undertake the difficult and strenuous task of relating on an honest and sincere level with Negroes who have learned to suspect the "out-going" white who was traditionally the "bait" or instrument of the segregationist. The white student chooses the task of trying to be accepted and understood by people who may not make any deliberate effort to understand him, because they feel that they are the only ones who need to be or should be understood. A student who participates in this project also chooses to join the almost microscopic effort of being the Christian Church in that area of human affairs where the church is least "the Church, the body of Christ."

In addition to what a student might give in the way of service to a particular church, what he receives is unmeasurable. The experience gained by a student participating in the SIM program could only be surpassed in value by a full year in such a position. And yet, there is much to be gained by student and church in spite of the brief duration

of the involvement. For through SIM both the student and the church will discover that neither the capacity to minister to people nor the ability of a congregation to understand and accept the services of a minister is based on similarity in race. And this is necessary if the church is going to become an inclusive church, which it must be if it is to be relevant.

Certainly a student will and should be somewhat apprehensive about the relationship of a Negro minister to a white congregation or a white minister to a Negro congregation. The congregation will most definitely have their apprehensions. However, these very apprehensions can be of a positive value to those who become directly involved in the SIM program. Attachment by minister to congregation and congregation to minister is not "just an automatic thing." You earn your acceptance and understanding. The truth of the matter is, a student is not accepted by a Negro congregation because he is white, nor is he rejected for this reason, but because he is able to minister in some meaningful way to these people. This means that a student who is going to participate in this program needs to understand himself. He needs to know what his own Christian faith means, and how this very faith applies to what he does with his life.

It is not wise for a student to assume that since a congregation has invited him, those people must be Christians. While this may be true, it should always be remembered that interracial confrontation is not the way in which these people's Christianity is customarily expressed. Therefore, there may be doubt on the part of some members of a congregation, and even hostility. In most instances those persons who make up the congregation, regardless of whether they be professional or non-professional, have not been accustomed to the type of relationship which is now placed before them. Negroes as well as whites have to learn to like another person, and consequently accept him.

But above all this, one of the great values of the Student Interracial Ministry program is the unusual opportunity it affords churches, both South and North. No denomination has given very much emphasis to the unique type of ministry which is provided churches by SIM. Congregations are offered through SIM an opportunity to explore some of their own ideas which they might not find it possible to do through denominational channels. The Student Interracial Ministry gives a local congregation the opportunity to decide whether this is a relevant ministry for that church; and an increasing number of congregations are discovering that it is.

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