

A Southern Student Evaluates

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Hailing from Killeen, Texas, Douglas Renick came into contact with the Student Interracial Ministry shortly after his arrival at Union Seminary in the fall of 1961. As his article shows, Doug became involved in SIM "rather incidentally." After serving as an assistant to Rev. McCloud this past summer, Doug returned to Seminary and was elected onto the Executive Committee of SIM. He writes:

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It all began so simply. I was from the South and I was interested in the race problem. An innocuous announcement appeared in the dorm elevator saying that the Student Interracial Ministry Committee was having a meeting in the upper refectory. Rather incidentally, I went to that meeting. It was the beginning of a significant change in the course of my ministry.

The enthusiasm and sincerity of those people who had returned from a summer of SIM work convinced me that my participation in the group would be worthwhile. It took me some time to grasp the full significance of what the SIM committee was doing. All the facts and figures about SIM's work in the past two summers meant little to me, but the people who had been in the work were alive with new insights into themselves and the nature of the church. This "aliveness" was catching.

The SIM Committee itself is something of a phenomenon. From the beginning the committee demanded that students direct the program. This means that the bulk of the work--selection of students and churches, and collection of funds--is done voluntarily. It was amazing to me that a task of such size did not crush the life out of the committee, but the dedication of those who were in the program and those who were convinced of its worth carried the committee along.

The committee learned to live by faith. In spite of very discouraging times of long waiting to hear whether this church or that source of money actually was going to respond, the committee continued to recruit students for the summer, screen them, and invite them to the orientation conference. And like a long-expected gift from heaven, the churches and money that were necessary were provided. Such perseverance has now placed the committee on firmer ground.

My work on the committee led me to apply and I was accepted along with fourteen other students to participate during this past summer. The orientation conference helped prepare us for the possible situations in our interracial ministry. After the conference we split up and went our respective ways to churches scattered over eight southern states. There is certainly no chance of mistaking SIM as a mass movement. At the same time, the work it accomplishes cannot be measured in the numbers touched by it. Granted, the more who can and will participate, the greater its impact, but those of us in the program have discovered that there is something of infinite worth in the reconciliation of one brother to another across racial and class lines.

SIM is a very quiet project. We have purposely tried to keep it from becoming a mass movement where there is the temptation to jump on the bandwagon. The element that keeps this from happening is the depth of involvement that inevitably occurs within the three months of a concentrated dose of interracial ministry. To picket, sit-in, or "freedom ride" requires a certain amount of courage, but to live in the Negro community for three months--more especially in the home of a Negro family--requires more than courage. It requires love, patience, and the ability to face oneself honestly with all the masks removed. This self-revelation is intensified and made possible because the work occurs within the church. It is in mutual struggling to grow in Christ that two or three together discover the unity which is a possibility in Christ. When this happens, they find themselves irrevocably bound together. This is not theory. It has happened to me and to many others who have participated in SIM.

Having read the mid-summer and final reports of the SIM participants, I have found some major motifs running through them. One of the most frequent is the insight that is gained by living within the community of another race for a ten-to-twelve week period. From a church in Houston a student writes: "It continues to amaze me how living among a people leads one to completely empathize with them and their living conditions." From Raleigh a student writes for himself and his wife: "Living among Negroes . . . has given to us a very interesting observation: we have more-or-less identified ourselves with the Negro. We have come to feel more-at home with the Negro than with the white." This observation of the race problem in the South was entirely new for most of us who are white and middle class to the core. This also leads to a new sensitivity to social injustice and racial prejudice. Another student in Raleigh reported: "This dawning assumption that we are alike and essentially one people has made me more and more sensitive to the daily injustices in which we participate." Seeing oneself as a part of a new and different community results in a new self-understanding. One student wrote: "But the greatest lesson I learned from this experience was to replace my own prejudices with love and understanding, and I learned that lesson from the Negro people among whom I served."

Another major motif in the reports is a fresh appraisal and a new appreciation for the local church. From Tennessee: "This summer has brought me face to face with the problem of Christian ministry through the structure of a particular local congregation in a fruitful way." Speaking about his church in Houston a student reports: "She is overburdened with delinquent members, yet not burdened enough with non-members, she is lost in a maze of activities without direction, yet in all of this, Pine Crest exists day to day by the grace of God." He goes on to say, "I'm grateful for this time of growth among these Christian folk, and grateful for the church of Jesus Christ which makes this possible." Many of the SIM reports show a listing of activities which the students participated in as part of their jobs. It is evident that in almost every instance the students were involved in the day to day struggle of a local congregation. This was quite revealing to many of us who had made some serious accusations about the church from a very observational stance.

The most humbling and inspiring aspect of the reports is the frequent confession of a new experience of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. After living in a segregated society and a segregated church a student reports: "After all, I believe to confess Jesus Christ is to affirm

the abolition and end of division and hostility, the end of separation and segregation; it is to affirm Peace and Reconciliation." Another continues: "The communion we shared in work and worship was living proof to me of the oneness of our Church and Faith." After one student had known the possibility of reconciliation she asserts, "We must open ourselves to the new life of Christ to have the internal patterns of division broken down, over and over again." From Mississippi a student reports that his service there has "demonstrated for the first time in Mississippi that a white person and a Negro community (in the restricted sense of the word) can live together voluntarily, without external support and within the context of the Christian faith." It is impossible to include all the statements which witness to a realization of unity in Jesus Christ.

I have the distinct feeling as I read the summer reports that the participants face an impossible task in trying to explain all that has happened during three swift-moving months. So many of our experiences were similar that the evaluation conference in Raleigh was filled with enthusiasm and the desire to share part of the richness of the summer. Now, I am trying to share my experience of the past summer by working toward the coming summer as a member of the SIM committee here in New York. I am a part of that small group of people who are fond of being foolish in faith. We are trying to involve people in the SIM program. The exciting thing is that it is no longer just a Union Seminary project. There were fifteen students participating in the program last summer and they represented twelve seminaries. The students were spread through eight southern states, creating little pockets of leaven in the church, leaven that someday may produce quiet integration of brother with brother instead of violent desegregation that many times produces hate and more barriers for true brotherhood. I am grateful for the opportunity I had to share in the church as an SIM participant. It was a summer of spiritual growth and challenge.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The importance of student-initiative in the work of the STUDENT INTERRACIAL MINISTRY has been stressed often, both in this report and in our meetings. And we do not want to lose this orientation, for SIM would not be the same program if it were not totally student-controlled. There are, however, dangers in this, such as the inefficiency which can result when the bulk of the work is being done by people whose primary commitment is to their studies. There is also the danger that the inexperience and enthusiasm of youth will result in hasty and careless steps. In this light, the STUDENT INTERRACIAL MINISTRY Committee wishes to express its deep gratitude to those who--respecting the fact that SIM is a student project--have given their time and experience. Particular appreciation is due to Dr. J. Oscar Lee, Executive Director, and his Department of Racial and Cultural Relations of the National Council of Churches, and to Dr. Roger L. Shinn, who have continually given of themselves for the good of the project.

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