

The Work of a General Superintendent.

NO development in church life can be understood apart from its historical background, and the work of the General Superintendent should be considered in relation to the conditions which led to his appointment. When the present century opened congregational polity was confronted by serious problems. Thoughtful men were asking three questions :

1. Can Independency maintain vigorous churches in the villages?
2. Can Independency meet the needs of new districts and keep abreast of the expanding population?
3. Can Independency secure and maintain an efficient ministry?

These were vital questions. Hitherto the village churches had supplied a good percentage of our leaders and a constant supply of clean, vigorous life to our urban churches. The traditional methods of expansion were proving too slow, and few individual churches were capable of initiating new causes. The ministry was harassed into restlessness by deplorably inadequate stipends : twenty-six per cent. of our ministers were receiving no more than £100 per annum, and eighty-five per cent. were in receipt of stipends that did not exceed £250. Our ministry was the worst paid of the great churches in Britain, with an average stipend of about £180. At least one-third of our ministers had definitely appealed for a change of sphere, and many others cherished the desire. Moreover, many pastors had outstayed their usefulness, and 160 accredited ministers were left without pastorates. The consideration of these questions revealed the necessity for greater co-operation within the denomination, for some organisation that would bring the resources of all to the help of each, and for a truer expression of the Christian law that men should bear one another's burdens while each carried his own load. What could be done to meet these clamant needs? Suggestions were made which struck at the root of congregational polity, but these were decisively rejected by the denomination. The Century Fund was raised as a temporary expedient to meet pressing needs for extension, and the denomination gave itself to long and patient investigation to discover what resources congregationalism had within itself to meet modern conditions

and make its own contribution to the Kingdom of God. The result was the Scheme of Ministerial Settlement and Sustentation, which attempts to deal comprehensively with the whole problem while retaining congregational freedom.

THE SCHEME OF MINISTERIAL SETTLEMENT AND SUSTENTATION provides :

1. A Sustentation Fund available for churches which cannot themselves provide an adequate minimum stipend.

2. A means of facilitating pastoral changes which may be desired by churches or ministers. Provision is made to ensure that no minister shall be sustained in a pastorate against the will of the church, and that financial benefit shall be provided for any minister who fails to find a settlement under the terms of the Scheme.

3. A means of raising the standard of ministerial efficiency. The financial obligations of the scheme make it imperative that care be exercised regarding admissions to the accredited lists, and that the benefits of the scheme be limited to recognized ministers or probationers of the Baptist Union.

THE WORK OF THE SUPERINTENDENT is concerned with the administration of the scheme, in co-operation with the Sustentation Executive, the Area Committee, and the local Associations; and also with furthering the purpose for which the scheme was designed, i.e. the spiritual efficiency of Baptist Churches as instruments of the Kingdom of God. It is a *ministry*, and, therefore, one cannot exactly define its scope or give any exhaustive list of its obligations. You can tabulate the duties of a caretaker, but not of a minister. No task is outside the province of the superintendent that can cheer a colleague's heart, raise the spiritual tone of a church, or draw one soul nearer to the Master. He is commissioned by the denomination and the local churches :

1. *To Exercise a Spiritual Ministry throughout the Area.* When the confidence of the churches and ministers has been gained, this ministry presents opportunities far exceeding ability, time, and strength. On the superintendent's desk are letters asking advice in difficult situations and making most varied requests. He is invited to attempt the reconciliation of alienated workers, to prescribe courses of reading, to solve problems in church and school, to interview candidates for membership, to conduct preparation classes, baptismal services, campaigns, missions, etc. There are misconceptions to remove, mischievous statements to refute, divisions to heal, tired souls under juniper trees to refresh, and youthful enthusiasms to guide into profitable channels. Confidences and intimate details cannot be divulged, but some idea of the scope of this ministry will be gathered from

a recent page in a superintendent's diary, which covers one week's engagements. They were: three preaching services, one baptismal service, one communion service, two addresses at church gatherings, one address at a young people's rally, three interviews with ministers, one interview with a church secretary, one conference with a diaconate, two interviews resulting in a reconciliation, and one interview with a young man who desired to enter the ministry. This is sufficient to show that the superintendency affords a real, full, and profitable ministry within the denomination.

2. *Watch the Interests of the Denomination throughout the Area.* If Baptists are to render their maximum contribution to the religious life of England, consideration must be given to the growth of population, the development of new districts, and the temporary depressions which visit both industrial and rural areas. The watch-tower must be occupied while the valleys are tilled. The superintendent has special opportunities for observation, as his duties are spread over shires rather than streets. He has unique facilities for recognizing strategic positions, suggesting extension work to Associations, rallying help in aid of village causes, and rendering assistance to pastorless churches. Further, the superintendent can render effective denominational service by watching legal interests, safeguarding rights, upholding principles, and disseminating information.

3. *To Co-operate with Churches and Ministers Regarding Settlements.* This is delicate and difficult work, involving considerable correspondence, numerous conferences, and many interviews. In this connection the superintendent works under the direction of an Area Committee, on which each district in the area is directly represented, but the nature of the work demands that large discretionary powers be granted to the superintendent. The Area Committee functions with the superintendent in much the same way as a diaconate functions with the minister in an ideal church. Baptists will not accept a Stationing Committee or receive a ministry imposed from without. The choice of a minister rests with the individual church, and diaconates find it easier to consult with a person than with a committee. It is not a question of taking a rigid nomination to a church, but of patiently exploring the local situation with the deacons, and making suggestions based on the ascertained needs. Changes between the areas are facilitated by frequent meetings of the General Superintendents, under the chairmanship of Mr. T. S. Penny, J.P., when careful consideration is given to the expressed desires of ministers and the requirements of individual churches. When a grant is desired from the Sustentation Fund, the approval of the local Association and the Sustentation Executive is secured

before an invitation to the pastorate is given. The advantages of the Settlement Scheme over the humiliating methods formerly adopted have been quickly appreciated by the churches, who almost invariably consult the superintendent when a vacancy occurs. Correspondence suggests that many ministers are no less appreciative of a scheme which provides equitable treatment for all, and affords a means of changing pastorates without loss of self-respect.

4. *To Organize the Simultaneous Collection.* In order to fulfil the denomination's pledges concerning sustentation, it is necessary to maintain the annual contributions at about £15,000. This requires special preparation and constant advocacy. The Fund has been seriously prejudiced by inaccurate statements concerning its purpose and administration, but recent experience shows that the contributions can be considerably increased if the working of the scheme and its beneficent results are carefully explained to the churches. It is the superintendent's privilege to organize the annual contributions to the Fund and, thereby, to ease the burden which rests upon his brethren in the smaller churches.

The purpose of this article is to explain, rather than to justify, the administration of the scheme; but it should be pointed out that present conditions show a striking contrast to those prevailing when the scheme was introduced. The average stipend has risen to £271, which represents a total increase of nearly £180,000 in the annual income of British Baptist ministers. In spite of the increased facilities for notifying a desire to change pastorate, there were only 74 names on List "A," and 132 on List "B," in January, 1925, and this number is being steadily reduced throughout the year. Even more arresting is the fact that there are now only five ministers without a pastorate under the scheme, and each of these receives financial benefit under clause 19. These results have been achieved by voluntary co-operation and without the sacrifice of principle. When the scheme was introduced, Dr. Clifford reminded us that principles were eternal, but needed applying to the necessities of the hour; and that it was our business to understand the scheme so that it should not be misinterpreted or misunderstood. The principles have been applied with some measure of success, and it is hoped that this statement may further the understanding necessary for exact appraisal. Such a scheme can neither be administered successfully, nor interpreted adequately, without full recognition of the spirituality of its purpose.

H. BONSER.