

The General Superintendents

THE name of Dr. J. H. Shakespeare will live in any history of the Baptist denomination for three things—the erection of the Church House which has become the centre of Baptist life and witness; the formation of the Baptist World Alliance with its world-wide ramifications and the Ministerial Settlement Scheme for the support and settlement of ministers which is with us today.

The appointment of ten General Superintendents was an integral part of the scheme. Each was appointed to a defined part of the country to watch the interests of the denomination throughout his Area and with his colleagues to achieve the settlement of ministers in all parts of the country. Although familiar with the ministry of messengers appointed by the Associations to visit the churches the division of the country on an area basis and the appointment of General Superintendents was an entirely new departure. Shakespeare built better than he knew and the structure remains as one memorial to his foresight and service. Perhaps the denomination had not been prepared for such a radical change in polity. Certainly it was not welcomed by a considerable number of churches and the new appointments were viewed with grave suspicion. Some of this may be seen in the care taken by Wheeler Robinson in his chapter on the Baptist doctrine of the Church to define the office and function of the General Superintendent. He writes that the name General Superintendent "must not be taken to imply more than moral and persuasive authority. It would quite misrepresent their position and work to regard them as 'bishops' but they are more than travelling secretaries. They are encouragers and advisers, and are at the service of the churches and ministers for all spiritual purposes."

It can be said immediately that this function of the General Superintendent has never been lost for although he may be expected to facilitate ministerial settlements and be available for advising and guiding ministers and churches the Home Mission Scheme states clearly that the primary concern is the spiritual life of the churches and the exercise of a spiritual ministry. This is also emphasised when each new appointment is made.

From the introduction of the scheme by Dr. Shakespeare there were those who were suspicious and fearful. It was viewed as the thin end of the wedge toward a much more integrated ecclesiastical system.

It is in this field that great strides have been made in the past 25 or 30 years. The Superintendency has largely, if not altogether, grown out of the suspicion and fear which marked the early years. The Superintendent is accepted for that which his appointment suggests, a friend and adviser to churches and ministers, a leader, but not in

any way a dictator. There are some who would say that this development is due to the weakening of church life. Churches once strong and sturdily independent are glad of any available help. Others might suggest that the economic situation is the guiding factor. But without doubt there has grown up within the churches a truer understanding and appreciation of the role the Superintendent has to play. Men of spiritual culture and experience find that ministers and churches turn increasingly to them for counsel and advice. The Superintendency has proved itself and few could conceive the continuance of our denominational life without it.

It is of considerable interest that the first chairman of the Superintendents Board was a layman, Mr. T. S. Penny of Taunton, and it is surely significant that this was the only lay appointment. The appointment was an attempt to escape any charge of clericalism. Mr. Penny's tenure of office was a long one and only terminated in April 1940 when a complimentary dinner marked its close.

Mr. Penny's immediate successor was the Rev. F. J. Humphrey who had played an important role in the life of the denomination and become President of the Union in 1938. But why this change? There were several laymen who were known to covet the chairmanship. The fear of clericalism had not been overcome. The pressure unquestionably came from the ministers.

Dr. E. A. Payne in his history of the Baptist Union makes a very brief reference to a series of ministerial conferences, arranged to cover different parts of the country, conducted by Mr. T. S. Penny and Dr. Shakespeare who was then in poor health. The ministers called to the conferences were mainly, if not wholly, from the aided churches or small churches near the aided level. The conferences were most unhappy to say the least. The impression was given that the ministers at this particular economic level and in churches of small membership were mainly responsible for conditions within the denomination following the first World War. Such an impression may not have been intended but that it was created cannot be denied. Some ministers were subjected to a long series of questions about themselves, the way they spent the day, their sermons and even the hymns they chose which was deeply humiliating. The conferences became the talking point in Fraternal where indignation rose to boiling point. The matter was raised in the Union Council and there was a heated discussion. The part Mr. Penny played may have been the lesser one but this undoubtedly broke the confidence of ministers in lay-leadership at the crucial point of settlement and the confidentiality of the Superintendents' work. Thus when, after a number of years, Mr. Penny resigned the chairmanship, a ministerial appointment was considered advisable, if not inevitable.

Those who have served as Superintendents would, I am sure, be almost unanimous that this must be a ministerial appointment. The nature of the task demands those who have themselves experienced the problems, frustrations and temptations of the pastoral office as

well as the joy and satisfaction it gives. It is not questioned that there are among us laymen who would exercise the utmost discretion regarding all matters which might come before the Board but in the main they are of such a nature to call for the insight and understanding which comes alone from ministerial service.

A further development in the Superintendency came when Dr. Payne as General Secretary of the Union consulted the Superintendents on many denominational issues which previously would have been considered as outside their mandate. We make no attempt to interpret the mind of Dr. Payne but his consultations with the Board were greatly appreciated and, without anything being formally recorded, added to the worth and usefulness of the Superintendency. The members of the Board believed and, quite rightly, I think, that through their constant visitation of the churches in their Area and attendance at District and Association meetings together with their contacts with the ministers they were able to interpret the attitude and feeling prevailing at the time and few could do so better. They were at the grass roots of denominational life and were able to judge the likely reactions to proposals and activities emanating from the Church House. This is not to suggest that their judgments were always right or that they were always accepted. In any case there was often diversity created by the strength of the churches in the Areas and often by a recognition of different theological emphases. While the office of Superintendency remains as it is those who are called to the work are bound to be key figures in ascertaining and carrying through denominational policy.

No review of the Superintendency would be complete without recognition of the new situation created by the social changes and economic conditions of our day and the effect they are having on the task of the Superintendent, particularly where settlements are concerned. Many churches once able to support their own ministry are no longer able to do so or can only do this under the pressure of money raising efforts which often blunt the edge of the church's witness. The increase in the Home Mission stipend, while so necessary, leaves many of the churches struggling to meet their quota if a full-time ministry is to be retained. Joint pastorates and team ministries will help to ease the burden but such schemes cannot be carried through overnight particularly as they are contrary to the genius of our ministry as we have known it. The churches will have to think again and face up to some hard facts. The *Ministry Tomorrow* report recommended the creation of a Supplementary Ministry. What this will be and how it will dovetail into our system is still to be worked out but at the end the Superintendents will have to 'sell' the idea. This may not be easy for there remains a strong streak of independence and it will be sad if we find churches inviting totally unaccredited persons rather than accept a shared ministry.

Other pressures are coming which 10 or 20 years ago were almost undreamed of. The educational system makes a deep impact on

ministers with families. It is quite unfair to uproot children in the middle of a term or even in the middle of a year's work. Examinations and changes of school curriculum have become all important in the life of the child. Yet changes of pastorate cannot be regulated to the end of school year. It is understandable that ministers seek those parts of the country where the best type of education is available but churches in such areas may not be seeking a settlement and this so easily leads to frustrations on the part of the minister and also on the Superintendent.

For the minister's wife to seek and obtain employment is a relatively new thing, indeed would have been unthinkable only a few short years back, but it is now quite commonplace. Nevertheless this has repercussions on the settlement of ministers. It may be seen in longer pastorates but, when a change is desired, the Superintendent does not find it easy to suggest spheres suitable for both the minister *and* his wife.

Perhaps the most acute problem faced by the Superintendent is the settlement of the "over fifties". It seems strange that just when a minister has gained so much through experience and is enriched in spiritual understanding and insight the churches are reluctant to consider an invitation. Does it mean that these brethren who have proved themselves and could exercise an invaluable ministry are to be forced to continue in their present sphere, when a change would be beneficial to both church and minister, or left, as it were, on the scrap-heap? It is true that men in industry and commerce are being retired at 55 or 60 and many are being given redundancy pay at 50 but should we accept these standards for the ministry?

These and other problems tax the spiritual insight of the Superintendents but each brings to the task the wealth of his own experience and the assurance that the call to it comes from God as well as the denomination. Whatever future developments there may be we can rejoice in a company of men fully consecrated to the office into which they have been called.

But what of the future? It seems likely that the task of the Superintendents will be considerably increased. Supplementary Ministry, however well planned, will create problems both in the original settlement and in changes deemed to be advisable.

It is highly probable that the consultations begun by Dr. Payne will be extended, and it will be seen that the Superintendent is indeed a key figure in denominational life. Those who drafted the ten areas at the turn of the century planned better than they knew for apart from London and possibly the Central Area there is no desire for change or for a greater division of the country. This was made clear at the time of the Boundary Commission.

While this is particularly difficult for me to write there is a strong feeling that the chairmanship of the Board should remain as a ministerial appointment. This would enable the highly confidential

matters to be dealt with in the sympathy and understanding the ministry creates over the years.

Everyone will rejoice at the effort the Union is making to increase ministerial pensions but is not a consideration of earlier pensions also demanded? Even if some part of the pension could be made available at an earlier age it might make it possible for ministers to help in the supplementary scheme or accept the pastorate of smaller churches in possibly remoter areas where grouping or team ministry will not be feasible.

The confidence in the Superintendency which has grown up over the years is unlikely to be eroded while the denomination has the men who keep in heart and mind the care of both churches and ministers.

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Enquiries for the microfilms and the indices should be sent direct to:—University Microfilms Ltd., St. John's Road, Tylers Green, Penn, High Wycombe, Bucks., England.

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