PROFILE OF COMMITMENT—HOWARD FENIMORE SHIPPS

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Susan A. Schultz*

“My call to teach at Asbury Theological Seminary was as clear as my call to preach,” said Howard Fenimore Shipps at a faculty dinner welcoming him and his wife Ruth, shortly after he had joined the Faculty. This statement made an indelible impression on the mind of one listener who has recently had occasion to survey Dr. Shipps’ career and now to share a few insights into the life of this dedicated servant of God.

Howard Shipps was blest with the godly heritage of a Christian home. His father, Charles Carpenter Shipps, was a Commission Merchant, and his mother, Clara Elizabeth Fenimore, was related to the family made famous by the novelist, James Fenimore Cooper. They were members of the Delanco (N.J.) Methodist Church and were closely associated with the Delanco Camp Meeting. Early in life Howard was brought to a knowledge of personal salvation. His older brother, Dr. Hammell Shipps (Cinnaminson, N.J.), reports: “When a small boy he (Howard) had a serious injury and lay unconscious for several days. For a long period following this injury he suffered from incapacitating headaches which apparently defied medical measures. Much prayer was made for his recovery. During this time he felt God’s call to the ministry and he promised God that he would heed the call if He would heal him. He was evidently miraculously healed and had no recurrence of the malady. He has never wavered from the calling.” Commitment has been the hallmark of his life as a Christian, as a pastor, and as a scholar.

*Professor of Bibliography and Research and Director of Library Services, Asbury Theological Seminary.
Profile of Commitment

His basic schooling was obtained in the Palmyra Public School, the Delanco High School, and Asbury College. It is an interesting parallel that his daughter, Sara Beth, attended and graduated from these same schools even as a child of the parsonage. Sara Beth did not find it a handicap to follow in the footsteps of her respected father. Following college days, Dr. Shipps earned his B.D. degree at Princeton Seminary and later his Th.D. from Temple University.

His commitment to do wholeheartedly whatever he found deserving of his effort and attention soon led to recognition of his leadership abilities by his peers. The Asbury Collegian, 1923–26, records his exploits as sophomore class president, president of the Asbury Athletic Association, and president of the Athenia (Literary) Society. He was a member of the Inter-collegiate Debating Team which matched wits with teams as far away as Wheaton College and the University of Wyoming. Under his father as captain of the community athletic team, Howard had early learned to excel in various sports and was the winner of many trophies and letters. Not the least of his honors was that of the winner of the well-known Penn Relays. Of his leadership in basketball at Asbury College, the Collegian reports: “Captain Shipps is a natural leader, always cool and dependable; a splendid floor general.” This interest continued into seminary as he traveled with the Princeton basketball team. Perhaps the discipline of these sports inculcated in him that attitude of fair play, a policy which is recognized by his colleagues on the seminary faculty. This is elaborated upon by one of his senior colleagues.

HOWARD SHIPPS—AS I HAVE KNOWN HIM

As one who has been a colleague of Howard Shipps continuously since his coming to our faculty, I have had opportunity to observe him under a wide range of experiences and in a wide variety of circumstances. Let the first observation be this: he has always embodied the qualities of the Christian Gentleman. Pressures of issues or schedules have never cancelled this out, nor even clouded it.

In committee work and in faculty sessions, I remember him as one whose fair-mindedness usually carried the day with his colleagues. He seemed to work by an unspoken principle of always “having something to say the second time around.” In dealing with those with whom he felt he
must take issue, he was always gracious in his opposition—he always seemed to want to leave an opponent with "a way out," a way to save his own pride.

The foregoing suggest a keen sensitivity to the feelings, the needs, and the opinions of others. If he seemed at times to be a bit "slow to speak," he was never "slow to think," and taking more time than the rest in reaching a decision almost uniformly resulted in a quality of opinion which commanded our respect.

These qualities, along with many others, add up to the estimate suggested above. His presence on our faculty has enriched not only his students, but also those of us who worked with him. It is significant that those of us who worked with him the most closely felt most strongly the favorable impact of his life and character. He put into the kind of words that even the non-literate could read, the testimony to Christian sanctity.

Home and church combined their influences to shape this life. In his youth Howard was deeply involved in all the activities open to young people such as the Epworth League and the Youth Temperance League. No doubt this bore fruit in his years as pastor in numerous churches in the Southern New Jersey Conference of the Methodist Church when he took a special interest in youth and was innovative in his work with young people. He recognized the need of separate facilities for young people's activities and used his office to secure a separate building for them in one of his early churches. With truck and loudspeaker he took the church ministry outdoors into the resort areas on the Jersey Coast. This special ministry led to the opening of a new church which was then added to his appointment. He worked with the Salvation Army in fresh air camps for city children and during the depression arranged for young people to attend the Delanco Camp Meeting without charge for meals and lodging.

As a pastor he had the heart of a true shepherd. He was unflinchingly faithful to his responsibilities as minister to his people. It should be noted that he served his home church in Delanco for eight years, a prophet recognized in his own country. Nor did his life escape the crucible of suffering. Financial strain during the depression when salaries could not be paid, the heartache of delivering "missing-in-action" messages to the bereaved during the Second World War; the long, critical illness of thirteen-year-old Sara Beth, an only child, which
often seemed to bring family responsibilities into conflict with the duties of his pastorate.

His was a lifelong commitment to the message of heart holiness and to identification with the cause of Christian sanctity regardless of the price to be paid. He was a leader in the movement, serving for twenty-five years as president of the Delanco Camp Meeting, founded by Dr. George Ridout, and later known as the Fletcher Grove Camp Meeting. He was also the founder of the Ministers’ Conference on the Deeper Life which continues to be held annually and which brings renewal and divine empowerment to many pastors and to laymen as well.

In his Annual Conference he was a leader in evangelism and served many years as chairman of the Board of Evangelism. Some excerpts from his reports in the *Southern New Jersey Conference Journals* give the reader a glimpse into the deep concern which motivated him in this ministry:

1935. We would desire that during the coming year an earnest effort be made in the churches throughout the Conference to remove every obstacle in the way of that mighty religious awakening which God so much desires to give. Let us go forth to make this the greatest year in our history for the spirit of evangelism! Will we dare to believe that God can help us to make it so? God’s skies are still full of Pentecosts.

1937. Methodism had its rise in the personal experience of Wesley, and its power cannot be properly appraised without counting the importance of Divine guidance and fervent prayer. It is of the greatest importance for us to build our plans and programs upon lives that have been quickened, like Wesley’s, in the heartwarming way of Aldersgate, and upon that waiting before God that gives wisdom and power for the task.

1938. Someone has said, “When John Wesley went from Aldersgate, he went from religious ecstasy to fifty years of obedience, costly, hard, and ceaseless. After Aldersgate he made history.” Let us make the chief purpose of our ministry during the coming year, not only to add members to the church, but to add members to the living body of Christ. Let us make Aldersgate the lifelong urgency of our ministry.

1940. Methodism is mobilized and equipped to do great service for Christ and mankind in these difficult days. If the Holy Spirit should come upon our modern united Methodism as He did upon the early Christian Church, we of the Church would become awakened and irresistible witnesses in our local communities, in the United States, and in the near and far-flung Mission Fields.
1942. We feel, as has been expressed by Bishop Hughes, that the
time has now come when Methodism must evangelize or perish. We call
upon every pastor and lay delegate to wait before God until his own
soul has begun to burn with that sacred enthusiasm which will bring
upon him a new passion for the lost. This spirit of enthusiasm and passion
must become contagious. It must be carried by you down into the heart
of every church within the bounds of this Conference.

1945. We are now called to a great evangelistic Crusade. How
shall we do it? It is our opinion that before we can regain and “main-
tain the spiritual glow” of early Methodism, we too, like the disciples,
must have a baptism of the Holy Spirit. What was the secret leading to
the changed lives of those early disciples? The New Testament tells us
that they “continued with one accord in prayer,” not one day, but ten
days, and the Spirit was given them. Prayer brought them close to God,
and in that closeness they saw the things in their lives which hindered
the work of grace. When they understood they surrendered to God, and
He came into their lives and filled them with His power.

1953. (Reference is to the great World Mission of Evangelism
announced by the World Methodist Council at Oxford, England, in
1952.) Here is our high calling in Christ! The local church is the point
of battle, the place of action. The success of this campaign requires vision—
vision of God, of self, and of the needs of our world; it requires passion—
passion that will kindle new fires upon the altars of our hearts, our
homes, and of our churches; it requires personal sacrifice—sacrifice of
time to pray, to wait before God, to visit, to witness for Christ. Let us
each one ask himself honestly and sincerely, “Am I really and fully com-
mitt ed to this World Mission of Evangelism so that God can use me in
the way that He please s, or am I just celebrating another anniversary?”
Yes, Christ can change the world, but He can only do it through me as
I am fully committed to His will and His program for the church.

As pastor of growing and changing congregations, Dr. Shipps was
committed to the pursuit of continuing education. Long before he
thought of teaching at Asbury Theological Seminary, he took addi-
tional courses to broaden his horizons. When the Seminary’s invitation
came to him, he needed only to take his qualifying examinations and
write his dissertation, having previously taken the courses Princeton
Theological Seminary and Temple University offered in his field.
Since coming to Asbury Seminary he has sustained his scholarly interests
by avid reading, travels at home and abroad, and researches locally in
the history of Bethel Academy, Methodism’s first effort in higher educa-
tion in the West. From his pen have come A Short History of Asbury
Theological Seminary, in celebration of its fortieth anniversary; Benjamin Abbott, Forgotten Apostle of Methodism, doctoral dissertation at Temple University; contributions to the World Encyclopedia of Methodism. He also helped edit the Methodist Trail in New Jersey on the occasion of the Conference's 125th anniversary.

Travels abroad took him to Europe several times where he followed the Wesley trails in England, and the Luther trail and other Reformation sites on the Continent. He was a member of the Oxford Study Group in Methodism, which met in England in 1969.

Weekend retreats for seminary students at the Trappist Monastery in Gethsemane, Kentucky, now scheduled quite routinely, were also an innovation which can be credited to Dr. Shipps. These retreats have been most meaningful in the lives of the participants. An unexpected by-product of this venture was the close personal friendship which developed between Dr. Shipps and the late Thomas Merton. This resulted in a significant visit of Brother Merton to the Asbury campus. After Merton's death, Dr. Shipps received a special invitation by telegram to attend Merton's funeral.

Howard Shipps' life of dedication and commitment may well be epitomized in the words of Charles Wesley:

A Charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify;
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill,
O may it all my pow'rs engage
To do my Master's will.

Arm me with jealous care,
As in thy sight to live:
And oh, thy servant, Lord, prepare,
A strict account to give.

Help me to watch and pray,
And on thyself rely,
Assured, if I my trust betray,
I shall forever die.