THE WORK OF THE FIELD

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Have you ever contracted the construction of a building or other facility with a less-than-reliable building contractor? Possibly his “selling-point” was lower costs, the employment of workmen from within your community or membership, or fewer days until completion. The results, however, could be summed up as a poor quality of workmanship, a low grade of materials used, the oft-recurring request for extension of time for construction, and, above all others, much dissatisfaction and frustration. If this plight has never been yours, then accept this bit of hard-learned advice from one who has had such experiences. Employ a qualified contractor, even though his price might be a little higher; demand good quality materials; allow ample time for completion. Such an approach will be more likely to assure satisfactory results.

This advice is also applicable to Christian service and church work. Some local congregations are “under contract” to less-than-qualified “contractors” or ministers. Others are not receiving quality workmanship from their “carpenters” or church workers employed. Yet other congregations are not insistent upon first-quality materials and they are receiving the same. Still others are growing weary because of the over-extension of time required to complete various phases of the “building” or program. The result of each phase, as well as the whole, is deep-down dissatisfaction for both ministers and parishioners.

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Some local congregations have known dissatisfaction for so long that they have concluded nothing better is possible. Many persons or families have moved their membership from one local parish or denomination to another nearby, hoping to find conditions improved.

Trying to be ever sensitive to the needs of the local church congregations and desiring to send forth the best-qualified Christian workers, Asbury Theological Seminary instituted its Field Education Department. All students who are enrolled in the Master of Divinity (formerly the Bachelor of Divinity) or the Master of Arts in Religion (formerly the Master of Religious Education) degree programs are required to serve two semesters in some capacity as a Christian worker under the supervision and counsel of the Director of Field Education. This in-service training is intended to prepare the student to understand realistically the responsibilities and problems of his calling and to apply intelligently his gifts to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Various areas of service are open to the students within a short driving distance of the Seminary. Many students serve as pastors in nearby parishes; this work is applicable toward the requirements. Other field opportunities include positions as church school teachers, youth ministers, children’s workers, directors of religious education, choir directors, ministers of music, hospital and rest home visitors, and participants in jail services and street meetings. Each student is expected to be faithful at his place of service, to make a monthly report of his Christian work to the Director, and to hand in a written specimen of his endeavors, expressing in summary his conscientious preparation for the chosen work. The Director attempts to make personal visits for a firsthand look at the student’s work, whenever possible.

As a student at Asbury Theological Seminary from 1958 until 1962, I was enrolled in the Field Education Program two terms. Both my quarters were spent as a student pastor. The professor in charge of the program at that time was Dr. Robert E. Coleman. In the fall of 1962, Dr. Howard F. Shipps became the Director; he has held this position since. Both dedicated Christian professors have given much time and energy to move the program toward the accomplishment of its objectives.

For the last five years I have served as pastor of the Nicholasville United Methodist Church, located in the same county as Asbury Theological Seminary. I have been privileged to have a number of seminarians work with me during this time. They have served as church school teachers, directors of children’s work, senior high youth ministers,
junior high youth ministers, and as directors of the junior church services. Dr. Howard F. Shipps has been of invaluable assistance to me in this work. He has helped in finding students for the local work, he has given counsel when any problems have arisen, and he has visited the church on a number of occasions to see how the field work students were getting along in their chosen places of Christian service. I have heard many students express personal appreciation for the aid and counsel they have received from their Director.

From my position, both as a former student and as a pastor, I am witness to the facts that the Field Education Program meant much in my own ministerial training and that the field work students who have worked with me have been a great asset to the local church program. Their presence with us means that we have "qualified" workers and helpers. Their workmanship has been, and is, "good quality" or exceptional. They have always been more than willing to cooperate and to fit into their places on the church staff. The result has been much satisfaction to both minister and congregation. Since a school is often judged by its students, our is one congregation which has a good feeling toward our "neighboring" seminary because of the love and dedicated leadership which we have received from the students.

I realize that a good builder must have quality materials if he is to finish with first-class construction, and I believe the inverse to be also true: quality materials must fall into the hands of wise and capable craftsmen if they are to be molded into a worthwhile product. Hence, I wish to extend my personal words of appreciation in tribute to Dr. Howard F. Shipps for the high-quality assistance he has given to our local church program as the Director of the Field Education Program, and for the capable workers whom he has placed in service with us. Knowing something of how much he has given and of how far he has been willing to travel to fill responsibly his leadership role, I am certain there are many other fellow ministers and local church congregations who join heartily with me in these words of praise and appreciation.