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The First Baptist Union Superintendents

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THE FIRST BAPTIST UNION SUPERINTENDENTS

THE Superintendency originated in the fertile brain of Dr. J. H. Shakespeare as part of a comprehensive Scheme of Settlement and Sustentation. The name was not new in Baptist history, but the conception of the office was novel enough to stagger the Denomination. Dr. Shakespeare had a clear idea of the men required for the task, the functions they should perform and even how they should be dressed. For good or ill, he was compelled to compromise, because those Associations which had whole-time secretaries insisted upon the right of nomination and, ultimately, upon the appointment of their own executive officers. The result was an initial Board on which administrative capacity and inspirational ability were well balanced. It was composed of five erstwhile secretaries, four ministers called from pastorates and one who had served as Continental Commissioner of the Baptist World Alliance. Space forbids even a thumb-nail sketch of these pioneers, but they have an abiding place in our annals. The first appointments, made in 1915, were as follows :—

Hector V. Thomas, retired 1924	J. Gyles Williams, retired 1922
C. G. Croome, died 1923	R. M. Julian, died 1924
Frank Durbin, retired 1928	N. H. Patrick, retired 1924
C. T. Byford, retired 1920	T. Woodhouse, retired 1930
J. W. Ewing, retired 1934	J. Meredith Jones, died 1934

These brethren, together with their Chairman, Dr. G. P. Gould, formed a great eleven and soon blended into an effective team. Happily, three are still with us—J. W. Ewing, whom age has not withered; T. Woodhouse, the embodiment of fidelity; and C. T. Byford, still active in good works notwithstanding physical disabilities.

What a commission was theirs! These men were given onerous responsibility with no authority save that which resulted from personal influence and character; burdened with administration, they were required to exercise a spiritual ministry throughout extensive areas. When asked whether he would be willing to preach for the Sustentation Fund, Dr. Ewing quietly replied : " I will gladly speak on this subject on suitable occasions, but shall wish generally to preach the Gospel." The Executive heartily approved the answer and this perspective has been consistently maintained.

The original Superintendents were handicapped in three ways. First, they were appointed in a period of depression, when Dr. Shakespeare averred that the Denomination was slowly bleeding to death. Associations were discussing " Our Arrested Progress "; ministers and churches were dispirited, war clouds had broken, and the world was in the melting pot. In advocating the adoption of the Settlement Scheme, the Secretary declared that more than

one-third of our ministers were seeking new spheres, a large number of churches desired a change of minister, one hundred and sixty accredited ministers were out of pastoral office and had no regular means of subsistence, while stipends were scandalously inadequate. At the first meeting of the Superintendents Dr. Shakespeare placed a mass of correspondence upon the table, saying, "These letters come from ministers who desire a change of sphere; henceforth they are your responsibility." They proved to be from men who were not prepared to resign under the Scheme until a settlement was assured. To assist them, the Confidential List was compiled, which resulted in an average of fifty settlements per year. This Confidential List has no place in the Settlement Scheme and is one of many "extras" which the first Superintendents cheerfully undertook. It was against this dark background that the Scheme was launched. A second hindrance arose from the inherent conservatism which contributes so much to our strength and weakness as Baptists. These pathfinders were not given a very cordial welcome by the Denomination and were allowed to drift into their position without any adequate Induction Service. Honoured as individuals, their office was suspect. Influential ministers and laymen had opposed the Scheme as a violation of congregational principles and even as tending "towards the development of sacerdotalism and ecclesiasticism." These unfounded assertions were subsequently echoed by feebler voices and created suspicion. Churches just above the aided line were needlessly jealous of their independence; while some below that line gloried in the fact that they did not apply for a grant, and fed a dubious vanity by depriving ill-paid ministers of a much needed increment. A number of ministers feared that the highest ideals of their calling would be in jeopardy if settlements were left to a few men, however sincere; and some felt justified in advi ing churches to boycott the Superintendents. Thus, cross recommendations added to the general confusion. A third handicap was the inevitable consequence of sailing into an uncharted sea. Those appointed later, inherited the systems devised by their predecessors, and could consult with colleagues when new problems arose. The first holders of the office, however, had perforce to make precedents, improvise methods and face novel situations. Moreover, they were confronted by an avalanche of problems. Ministers out of a pastorate, and those who had outstayed their usefulness, wanted assistance forthwith; while many tangled skeins were thrust simultaneously into the hands of the Superintendents for immediate unravelling. In these circumstances, delay in finding a solution was apt to be proclaimed as failure by those already exasperated by bitter experience.

The first Superintendents faced these difficulties with patient courage, and, gradually, won the confidence of the Denomination. They made mistakes, of course, but their counsel was increasingly

valued by ministers and churches. Curiously, critics became more vocal as they decreased in number. Complaints were made regarding the cost of the Superintendency, and demands arose for a Commission of Inquiry into the administration of the Scheme. After full investigation, the Commission reported, in 1925, that the success of the scheme as a whole was beyond doubt or question, adding that the Superintendents had rendered invaluable services and were deserving of the confidence and support of the entire Denomination. In spite of this testimony, the baiting continued until 1926, when Mr. Aubrey, in the *Baptist Times*, made a striking call for fair play. This plea, strongly reinforced by Dr. Charles Brown, Mr. T. S. Penny and Dr. T. R. Glover, proved effective; and thereafter the Superintendency had an assured position. Those who succeeded to the office are grateful to God for their intrepid predecessors who blazed the trail. Hats off to the pioneers!

H. BONSER.

THE SUPERINTENDENCY IN SCOTLAND

THE office of Superintendent in Scotland is no sinecure, for combined with it is the Secretaryship of the Baptist Union of Scotland, the work of which frequently overshadows the particular function of the Superintendent. It might be said that the official of the Baptist Union of Scotland is a Secretary throughout the week, and a Superintendent at the week-ends, since it is at the week-ends he preaches in vacant churches, conducts anniversary services, and inducts ministers to their charges; though occasionally he meets a vacancy committee on a week-day evening.

The number of churches under his care in Scotland is smaller than the number for which several of the English Superintendents are responsible, but the area is much more extensive, and many of the churches are situated in remote parts of the land, the visitation of which involves long and tedious journeys. To reach some in the Western Isles occupies a day in each direction : and if the anniversary or induction is followed by a social function on the Monday, as it usually is, the Superintendent cannot return home until Tuesday evening, his secretarial work having accumulated meantime. A visit to Orkney and Shetland takes much longer, a few weeks, perhaps, when all the churches in the area can be visited.

Visitation has many compensations. The pleasure of a journey through some of the most beautiful parts of the country is worth noting, especially if the journey be undertaken in the season when nature is at its best. I recall a journey to Caithness, a distance of about 340 miles from Glasgow, to induct two young ministers to their charges, and to preside over the meetings of welcome. As the train rolled on past mountain, moor and loch, one remembered the words of the Hebridean song :—