

EDUCATING FOR CHANGE

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Between 1912 and 1918 leading figures in the Church of God embarked on a publishing project intended to educate and change the church and its ministry. Forgotten or little known today, *Our Ministerial Letter* played an important role during a critical decade in the history of the Church of God. In a very real sense, the newsletter's topics set the stage for the organizational revolution that began in the movement in 1917. It is not too much to say that agenda of *Our Ministerial Letter* was to educate for change.

The first major indication of a change in attitude toward organization had come in 1909 with the creation of the Missionary Committee. Not yet a true independent board or agency, the committee actually existed as a committee of the Gospel Trumpet Company. The committee did have a kind of supervisory role with missionaries, but its principal reason for being was fundraising in support of missionaries on the field. Over the next three years the committee perpetually labored at this assignment but fell far short of its financial goals. So it was that in the autumn of 1912 members decided to publish a monthly newsletter. The decision was announced in a pamphlet distributed that November under the title "Our Missionary Work." In effect the pamphlet was the newsletter's first number. Responses were enthusiastic, and for six months the newsletter was sent free of charge to "all ministers whose names and addresses could be obtained." (Remember, the first yearbook of the church did not appear until 1917. Published lists of ministers were only as reliable as the degree of ministerial cooperation). At the 1913 Campmeeting the Missionary Committee decided it could no longer subsidize the newsletter, but one year later ministers requested that it be restarted. At that time a subscription plan was developed, and *Our Ministerial Letter* began a run that lasted until 1918. A subscription cost \$.50/year, but many ministers failed to pay their bills until finally financial losses brought an end to the publication in 1918.

More than the simple details of its life and death, the newsletter's compelling interest lies in the list of its contributors and its influence on the sweeping organizational changes that unfolded in the Church of God just as the newsletter's run was concluding. The newsletter's committee named sixteen men and one woman as a kind of contributing editors. Space does not permit the full roster to be listed here but its names read like a list of the movers and shakers in the movement for the next twenty-five years, including such individuals as F. G. Smith, R. R. Byrum, H. M. Riggle, Lena Shofner Mattheson, E. A. Reardon, J. T. Wilson, and others. Nor was the roster limited to Americans; another regular contributor to the newsletter was J. J. M. Roy, a leader in the Church of God in India. The contributors either were or soon became prominent leaders in the church during an era of great change. The subjects they addressed strongly suggest that they wrote with a view toward advancing change in the church.

The very first essay to appear was written by J. W. Phelps, representing the Missionary Committee. His subject was tithing—planned systematic giving. If the committee was to disburse funds in support of missionaries, a budget and a reasonable regular flow of contributions was essential. But in 1912 majority opinion in the movement held that tithing was unbiblical, an outdated relic of Old Testament law. With budget levels far short of minimal support goals, Phelps set out to educate ministers about tithing's importance and biblical legitimacy. Other contributors followed his lead. So, for example, Russell Byrum published a forceful essay on ministerial education titled "The Preacher Among his Books," including a list of requisite titles and strong language about the discipline of reading. Most of the essays in *Our Ministerial Letter* were neither brief nor fluff. Thus we find J.J. M. Roy's twenty page essay on the psychology of hermeneutics.

The organizing committee stated three goals for the little publication. They wanted to provide a vehicle through which ministers could exchange opinions on matters of vital interest to the church. They also sought to provide a means by which more experienced ministers could instruct their younger, less experienced colleagues in the practical arts of ministry. Lastly, the committee hoped to advance among their readers the realization that they were not isolated individuals but members of a worldwide movement.

Alongside stated goals, however, we must consider the effect which *Our Ministerial Letter* had on the Church of God movement. Five years after the appearance of the newsletter's first number, ministers of the

General Assembly established the yearbook and the General Ministerial Assembly. Those were only the opening notes of a chorus of changes in the movement's organization between 1917 and 1930.

It would be too much to say that *Our Ministerial Letter* caused those changes. But certainly those changes can be said to have grown from seeds planted in soil nourished by the newsletter during its brief but very significant life.

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