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The Promotion of Religious Education by Means of State Organizations

By FRANK H. BURT

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The splendid ideals and scientific principles of religious education with which the past few years have been enriched, having been generally proclaimed by literature and by conventions, it now remains to apply them to the improvement of actual conditions in specific instances. This already has been undertaken in the organization of groups of those interested in the problems of religious education in different communities into what are known as local guilds. But the question arises whether it would not be possible to further promote the improvement of moral and religious education by the formation of related organizations, each of which would have a single state as the definite field of its endeavors.

As to the wisdom of such organization, I would say, yes, without question. The experience of other organizations sufficiently similar to our own affords a basis of comparison; the general principles which must govern extension in any organization, the magnitude and variety of interests involved, the diversity of conditions in the midst of which the work must be done, the differences in personality of local leaders, and the variety of methods which must be employed combine to make it both desirable and necessary that the form of organization adopted shall provide for wide variation in method, large adaptation to local conditions, for the largest possible differences of individuality in leadership and for the use of a large number of people. Wise state organization will help to secure these ends, and thus to hasten the attainment of our purpose.

The form of organization to be adopted is a question more difficult of solution. Three possible forms suggest themselves.

The members of the Association within a given state may, upon call of parties authorized to issue such a call, meet in convention, and when assembled formulate plans and provide means for extending the interests of the Association within the state. In such a plan the unit should perhaps be, not the individual member, but the individual members in a community associated in a guild or other form of local organization. The state convention thus becomes the medium by which the guilds shall voice their thought and direct action within the state. The state organization, perfected at the state convention, becomes the agent of the local guilds of a state. A logical outcome of this form of state organization is that the national convention shall be composed primarily of delegates from state organizations, and the national organization, in dealing with individuals and organizations within a state, shall act through or in harmony with the action and policies of the state organization.

A second form of state organization is that in which the national convention is the voice of the individual members or guilds, and the national organization its primary agent. In this case the state organization most naturally takes the form of an executive committee or board appointed in or by the national convention or the national organization. Of course, in such a case the state committee, or board, should consist of members of the Association resident within the state. It should be constituted as fully as possible in harmony with the desires of the members of the Association within the state. It becomes, however, practically an agent of the national body, appointed to carry into effect the actions and purposes of the national body, its responsibility being to this body rather than to the local guilds within the state.

A third form of organization is that in which the individual members of the Association or the local guilds may create both state and national organizations, each being responsible directly to the local guilds and having no official relation to each other, other than that of comity.

Illustrations of each of these forms of organization may be found. Each has its advantages and its disadvantages. It is for this body to determine which, if any, is best adapted to the purposes of the Religious Education Association. In view of all

considerations it would seem to me that the second form of organization is best adapted to the conditions in which the Religious Education Association now finds itself. Among the advantages pertaining to this form of organization may be mentioned:

First. It will serve to keep the individual member and the local guild in direct relation with the national organization.

Second. It will allow for the development of state organizations as opportunity and need require, and for such diversity in these organizations as is made necessary by existing circumstances.

Third. It will place the initiative in the matter of state organizations where there is the greatest strength, that is, in the national body, rather than at the place of probably least initiative, the individual member or local guild.

Fourth. It will at the same time allow for local initiative and provide for a large degree of local and state entity and responsibility.

Fifth. It will keep what is at the present time absolutely demanded—a strong influential center, composed of the leaders in the Association movement from all parts of the country.

Sixth. It will best provide the necessary direction and assistance in the establishment of state organization.

As a basis for discussion and possible action, I would suggest that the executive board be authorized to appoint state executive committees or boards, each to consist of not less than five nor more than twenty-one members. Such appointment should be made only after conference with the representative members within the state and only when the board is satisfied that the time is ripe for state organization in that particular territory. The state director may well be made the chairman ex-officio of this board. It shall be the duty of this board to advance within its territory the purposes of the Association as defined in the constitution. With these purposes, and with such further limitation and direction as may be provided in a set of by-laws which should also be formulated by the executive board, each state board should be left largely to its own initiative so far as details of method and means are concerned. The expense of each state organization would naturally need to be provided by that organization within its own territory.