

Our Contributors.

VACANCIES AND THEIR SUPPLY.

BY KNOXONIAN.

One of the wisest and most successful ministers in the Presbyterian Church of this country has often said that a well-equipped Presbyterian congregation with a popular and effective pastor at its head is the strongest of ecclesiastical organizations, and that a vacant Presbyterian congregation is the *weakest*. That brother might have gone a little farther and said that a Presbyterian congregation long vacant is very liable to become *worse* than weak. It is almost certain to divide into parties—parties that are formed around favourite candidates, and these parties spend what little strength they have in fighting each other instead of spending it in building up the congregation. If the divisions are long continued they often become chronic and humanly incurable. Strife dies hard, especially strife of the Presbyterian variety. Weakness is bad enough but chronic pugilism is worse. The happy man who gets the call can probably cure weakness by hard work but there is no power on earth that can readily heal chronic divisions in a Presbyterian congregation. They often crop out years after everybody thought the strife was buried. Such being the case, a vacancy is a serious matter. People who glibly talk about a "change" as a remedy for every ill that congregational flesh is heir to, often do not know what they are talking about. The few who sometimes force a vacancy in congregations seldom have any adequate idea of the responsibility they are taking upon themselves. The vacancy may bring ills a hundred fold worse than those that are supposed to make it necessary, and the "new man," selected after much friction, out of a possible fifty, may not be any better than the old one. Vacancies are among the very weakest spots in the Presbyterian system.

In a late issue of THE PRESBYTERIAN, Mr. McMullen states that the present method of supplying vacancies cannot continue without serious injury to the Church. Serious injury has already been done. Congregations that are least able to bear the strain have suffered, are suffering now, and must continue to suffer until some better method is adopted. We are neither holding nor covering our own ground. Vacant congregations within easy reach of the colleges can help themselves from dwindling away, but there is no help for weak congregations in localities distant from college centres.

It is not easy to agree with Mr. McMullen when he says that what the Church needs is a return to the old scheme in substance with a more vigorous and uniform enforcement of its regulations. It is doubtful if a return to the old scheme is possible. If we did return to that scheme would not the causes that broke it down before break it down again? The main causes, as Mr. McMullen so well points out, were two. Congregations in cities and towns, and it might be added, some in the country as well, felt that the scheme did not meet their wants, and probationers felt that it was injurious to their interests. The two chief factors in the problem were the vacancies and the probationers, and the scheme suited neither. *Should* we return to a scheme that failed to meet the wants of the parties chiefly interested? Is not the fact that both congregations and probationers found it to their advantage to break down the scheme evidence of itself that the scheme was not a good one?

The congregations that broke down the scheme did so in a very respectable and constitutional way. They simply went to their Presbyteries and asked leave to supply themselves. The Presbyteries said "yes," and the thing was done. The trifling fact that some members of the Presbyteries in question helped to make the rules was not here or there in the matter. The man who makes a rule has as good a right to break it as any other man. Presumably the congregations that asked leave to supply themselves were acting for their own best interests, and if for their own best interests, then for the best interests of the whole Church. Had these congregations found that the scheme in question was the best thing for them, nine out of every ten of them would have worked it gladly. Could they be blamed for not working a plan that they were absolutely certain would ruin them in a short time? Living by rule may be a good thing, but if a healthy man finds that doing so makes him lean and weak and poor, and reduces him generally, so that other men

trample upon him, "probably" the "best" thing he can do is to break the rule. His desire to break the rule will likely be increased if he finds that some of the other men are putting on his flesh, gaining his strength and acquiring his property. Now, if a congregation of loyal Presbyterians find that living by a rule which their Presbytery is willing to set aside, reduces their numbers, diminishes their funds, cripples their resources, and lessens their influence and sends their money and their people over to other denominations, are they to be blamed for asking liberty to live without it? The prosperity of the Church is surely more important than any scheme that Presbyterians are willing to lay aside when asked.

If, then, the old scheme did not work and cannot be revived and the present method, or rather want of method, is destroying congregations of a certain class, what should be done? To allow matters to drift is criminal. Are there no men in the Church who can solve the problem? After all our talk about unions and colleges and ministerial education and other big things, is there not practical sagacity enough in the Church to devise a plan that will keep our own small congregations from destruction?

A stranger who happened to drop into our General Assembly some evening when the Supreme Court is in a lofty mood, receiving an Episcopalian delegation, or establishing a Divinity Hall or some matter of that kind, would think that the Church could do almost anything it tried. If the stranger just heard the display of learning the Assembly can make on Romish ordination, or the cloud of learned dust it can raise about that unfortunate lady—the deceased wife's sister—he would wonder. But he would wonder still more if somebody told him that this learned and dignified body cannot devise a plan that will keep their small congregations supplied with the Gospel. Are we to go on forever spending days in the Church Courts on such questions, and hours, or perhaps minutes, or possibly no time at all, on matters closely connected with the very life of the Church? Nero fiddles while Rome burns.

The problem is this: Given a certain number of congregations that want pastors and a certain number of preachers who want congregations, what is the best method of bringing these preachers in contact with these congregations so that fairly promising settlements may be the result? Is there nobody in the Church that can solve it? Probably the best way to solve it would be to try and raise Chalmers out of his grave for a short time. He was a good organizer.

MISS WHATELY'S MISSION WORK IN CAIRO.

PEASANT LIFE ON THE BANKS OF THE NILE.

In my last letter a general idea was given of the mission work in which Miss Whately has been for many years engaged in Cairo, among the Moslems, Copts, and others, of the difficulties with which she has had to contend, and of the success which has crowned her self-denying labours. With your permission, I shall now supplement the statement then made with a few additional items of information, which may be interesting to certain classes of readers. In the first place, I may say that in the Mission House there is a

DEPOSITORY OF BOOKS,

in Arabic and English, Modern Greek and Turkish, which has been found very useful as a centre of mission work. Many Copts and Moslems go to it to purchase Testaments and Gospels, and often remain to converse on religious subjects—a great point gained. After the school had been some time opened, Miss Whately resolved to give the poor girls in attendance

A SCHOOL TREAT,

which proved so useful in its effects that it was afterwards repeated from time to time. On these occasions the little Egyptians were just as excited in anticipation of enjoyment, as are the children of any Sunday School in Canada. But how different the circumstances of an outing of this kind in Cairo from those connected with a picnic in Toronto! Before six o'clock in the morning, many of the girls had already collected round the school, anxious to set out for the public gardens, the scene of their expected treat, and were calling out that it was quite time, "for it was daylight." Even this showed what a change had been effected in these poor children, for Eastern girls are so timid and so unused to move from home, that a

few months before they would not have ventured the length of a street with their teachers, nor would their mothers have allowed them to do so. Their Christian teachers had now gained their confidence, and we see the consequence.

A curious assembly these young people made. Some had on plain blue cotton robes, scanty and ragged; others wore gay print trowsers, and a few had on old silk jackets with tarnished gold embroidery. All had their heads bound with kerchiefs of various kinds, and a veil of some sort is indispensable in the case of the poorest. Still in spite of the odd mixture of old and new clothes, rags and finery, Miss W. says there was a certain grace inherent in them all. There was only one drawback to the general gaiety, and some of them felt it—that their little brothers, who had collected to see them start, were not allowed to accompany them. Moslem prejudices and habits make it impossible to mix boys and girls in school, and, of course, the two sexes were not permitted to enjoy the outing in each other's company.

At seven o'clock the children and their matron went on in advance, Miss W. following with a donkey laden with carpets, and a servant carrying a basket of eatables. These consisted of cakes flavoured with saffron, and a quantity of native sweetmeats. Of course coffee in Eastern fashion was to be added. The spot selected was under the shade of a great sycamore tree in the public gardens, and far from any road. Here red blankets were spread, on which, after picking flowers and clapping hands and general chattering, they sat down and partook of the feast. This finished, the younger ones danced in a circle, waving small boughs of trees in an ecstasy of merriment. When it became too hot to walk or play any more, they all sat down in a circle, and while their teachers made garlands to amuse them, they sang an extempore song, the chorus of which was: "The teacher has brought us to the garden! Oh, the garden! the garden!" and so forth, clapping their hands as they sang. The veils were then resumed, the carpets packed, and all returned to the city.

THE FELLAHEEN

is the name of the poor country people (*Fellah*—tiller of the ground) often visited by Miss Whately, accompanied by some of her missionaries. The poorer Fellahs live in huts constructed of sun-dried mud, and consisting of but one room and without any windows. The only wood about them is that of a door so low that the owner must stoop to enter. They swarm with vermin, and in summer are, of course, dark and suffocating. The people at this season sleep outside, and in winter they are out all day in the sunshine. This shows the complete degradation of their condition that they are satisfied with such abodes when there is plenty of room to erect larger houses. And yet the genuine Fellah is said to be a strong and vigorous man. Through the ignorance and mismanagement of the young mothers, many children die off under two years, so that it is only those who inherit good constitutions that survive the effects of dust, flies, and general neglect. The pure air of the country, outdoor life, simple food, etc., develop the survivors into healthy men. The land is fertile, little fire or clothing is needed, so that the Fellaheen would be comfortably off, were it not for the

HEAVY AND INCREASING TAXES

of all kinds, with which they are oppressed. To avoid some of these they resort to amusing tricks to escape the sharp eye of officials. A funeral procession, for example, is sometimes seen entering from the country, the chanting Mollahs walking behind, and four men carrying the coffin with a red shawl over it. Some one has given the tax-gatherer a hint, and on arriving at the gate he insists on stopping the procession of mourners. They dare not resist; and on uncovering the coffin, which in the East is always open with a red pall spread over it, it is found to contain only cheese, or vegetables, which the owners had hoped to smuggle into town free of duty, thereby gaining a considerable sum.

They try to cheat others than tax-collectors occasionally. Miss W. once noticed a large heap of dry clay, in little balls about the size of a small pea on the bank of the Nile. On asking a Fellah what it was for, he coolly replied: "These are for mixing with corn. Many boats laden with corn stop here." The corn weighed heavier, of course, and the purchase was cheated. Tricks of trade, you see, are not con-