

AMBS in the 60s

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was a time of renewed hope; it was a time of deep despair. It was the era of darkness; it was the era of light." Charles Dickens has given us a vivid and compelling view of the ferment in England and France in the time of the French Revolution.

The 1960s in North America were also a time of excitement and agitation for change, not only in society at large but also in the churches and seminaries including our Mennonite churches and seminaries. Half a century ago there came riding out of the west a young man, Erland Waltner, with a vision and an ultimatum: "Things are going to have to change radically." And he spelled out his vision. There was a sense of excitement but also opposition, and enthusiasm for the vision but also intense debate. In short, there was ferment in Mennonite theological education.

The creation of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries brought with it a degree of uncertainty. It was not a sure thing that this experiment in inter-Mennonite seminary education would be successful and that the church would support it. There were differences in the cultural and religious climate of the partners in this cooperative effort. There was a formal understanding written in the Memorandum of Agreement that there would be mutual respect for these differences.

A special case in point had to do with patterns of worship, including the use of musical instruments. Other issues included the wearing of plain clothes, short hair for women, the wearing of the devotional veiling, peace and nonresistance, political involvement, ecumenical relationships, the issue of polity (congregational or synodical), patterns of decision making, the exercise of power and authority, and the degree of mutual trust and respect in our relationship.

There was considerable change going on beyond our Mennonite circles. Other denominations were feeling the sting of criticism and were rethinking their theology of the pastoral ministry, their patterns of church life including worship, their mission in the world, and their programs of theological education. This is true of the Roman Catholic Church (Vatican II) as well as of Protestants. The war in Viet Nam was a major factor in creating the disturbances that ricocheted through the churches. The titles of three books which were published during this time are a clue to understanding the malaise: Pierre Burton's The Comfortable Pew; Peter Berger's The Noise of Solemn Assemblies; and Gibson Winter's The Suburban Captivity of the Churches.

Seminary students were becoming increasingly restless about whether or not they would enter the pastorate and if so, whether the standard curriculum was the best way to prepare. It was criticized as a closed system with its inflexible course requirements. Its content focused primarily on the past and did not sufficiently make reference to the world in which they lived. Its methods were passing on the wisdom of the past by the professors who were the custodians of that heritage. The role of the students was to write these things in their notebooks and to demonstrate their mastery of the material at examination time. The professors used the "regurgitation" method rather than the Socratic method. The characteristic posture of the students was to be seated at the table with pen and paper writing rather than listening, talking, questioning, walking, kneeling, discussing, encouraging, guiding, and praying.

The AATS gave strong leadership to its member schools during these years of transition and change. One issue that was discussed and decided was the appropriate nomenclature for graduation from the basic three-year theological program, the BD and the MDiv degree. The issue was vigorously debated at the annual meeting but the Master of Divinity degree was ultimately approved and adopted by all or most seminaries.

Several elitist schools moved ahead on their own to create a new degree program, the Doctor of Ministry. Their unilateral and somewhat arrogant attitude and action created some bad feelings among the association members. The administrators made it clear that they neither sought nor needed the approval and support of the other members and certainly not of the less prestigious members. Some forty years later there are many DMin programs across North America.

The Association sponsored a study of changes in seminary education among its member schools. This study documented the changes taking place in seminary education but also had the effect of encouraging additional experiments to reform the curriculum. Volume One of a three volume report was called The Nature of the Church and Its Ministry. It stated that the purpose of the church was to advance the love of God and neighbor. The purpose of theological education was to be found in the purpose of the church. This simple statement (profound in its simplicity) provided the touchstone for assessing the appropriateness or relevance of the subject matter as well as the unifying principle in building the program of study.

The resources planning commission of the ATS came up with a new design for organizing theological education. The design proposed establishing clusters of theological schools (perhaps as many as twenty-five). These clusters would be ecumenical in character and would be plugged into the graduate schools of major universities where their campuses would be located. This was a direct challenge to the viability of schools like ours. Can you imagine with me that President Waltner would appear before the delegates of the General Conference Mennonite Church to propose moving back to Chicago where one of these clusters would be located and say with enthusiasm "I have a great new idea which will involve our moving back to Chicago!"? Although AMBS did not buy into the proposed model we were faced with the challenge to rethink our program. For these and other

challenges that we were facing it seemed good to us to study in depth the foundations of our program.

It seemed essential that these two seminaries who had committed themselves to walk together into an as yet unknown and uncharted future should reflect in depth on the assumptions on which they were building their programs.

We received a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc and the application stated that "in the current reappraisal of the nature of the church and her ministry there is need for a voice to articulate the vision for the Free Church which was rooted in the New Testament and was rediscovered and reaffirmed by the Anabaptist wing of the Reformation. We are convinced that the shape of theological education for churches in the Free Church tradition must emerge through the process of exploring the foundations of their heritage as it finds expression in the world today. In the further development of cooperation between these two seminaries and in the continuing integration of their academic programs it is the judgment of their administrative officers that the proposed study requires first priority."

Six members of the teaching faculty were selected to participate with me in the project. They represented both seminaries and the three departments of the curriculum. JC Wenger, CJ Dyck, John Howard Yoder, Millard Lind, William (Bill) Klassen, Leland Harder brought to the table years of theological study and teaching. All had published in their respective disciplines and were well known and highly respected in the wider church.

And so we began our trip of exploration of the Free Church heritage. There were moments of disappointment and frustration. Sometimes we were weary, sometimes we were locked in disagreement, sometimes we were bored, sometimes we were irritated by the refusal of our colleagues to be more flexible in trying to reach a consensus. But now and then our spirits were lifted as we came to resolution on issues small or great and we

were able to say in the words so dear to Free Churchmen that it
"seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us".

Ross T. Bender, Dean Emeritus, AMBS
AMBS Chapel Service, April 25 2008
50th Anniversary Celebration