

The Dean's Seminar: Some Reflections by Ross T Bender

The late sixties were a time of considerable ferment in American society, in the churches and in the seminaries. Older, well established ways of doing things were called into question and new patterns were created. In 1958 Mennonite Biblical Seminary (MBS) and Goshen College Biblical Seminary (GCBS) had launched a cooperative program of seminary education known as the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS). In 1964 I was appointed dean and had an office on each campus. My assignment was to manage and coordinate the joint program which consisted primarily of several courses on the Elkhart campus (later adding several more courses on the Goshen campus); a joint library collection open to both MBS and GCBS students; and an annual theological lectureship. There was in addition the Institute of Mennonite Studies (IMS) directed by CJ Dyck who reported directly to the Joint Administrative Committee (JAC).

At GCBS I was the administrative dean responsible not only for the academic program but also for some of the non-academic affairs of the seminary reporting directly to President Paul Miner. At MBS I was responsible for the academic program only in my role as academic dean and reported to President Erland Waltner. I was frequently asked whether this kind of administrative arrangement was viable. After all, the Bible says that no man can serve two masters. In spite of the complicated structures the system worked with minimal stress. I was given support and encouragement by both presidents to whom I reported.

Although there were differences in the cultural and religious climate of the partners in this cooperative program of seminary education, there was a formal understanding written into 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 were the wearing of plain clothes, cut hair for women, peace and nonresistance, political involvement, ecumenical relationships and the like. Of lesser visibility but perhaps of greater concern were the issue of polity (congregational or synodical), patterns of decision making and the exercise of power and authority, and the degree of mutual respect and trust in our relationship.

The most controversial issue that emerged in the Seminar and provoked intense debate had to do with the nature and practice of Christian ministry. One denominational leader who carried considerable influence opined that “for all its idealism and apparent use of biblical images we have been left with a theology that has failed, a theology that has not served us well.”

The creation of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries brought with it a certain degree of excitement in shaping something new; it also at the same time brought with it a degree of uncertainty for it was not clear what the roles of the present faculty members would be in the new scheme of things. Nor was it a sure thing that this experiment in interMennonite seminary education would be a success and that the church would support it.

Beyond our Mennonite community there was considerable change going on as well. Denominations and their seminaries 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 seminary education. This was 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, including the Mennonite churches. The titles of three books which were published during that time are a clue to understanding the malaise in society and in the churches: Pierre Berton, *The Comfortable Pew*; Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*; and Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*.

Seminary students became 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 around them. 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 students were passive rather than active in the learning process. The professor 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, walking, kneeling, discussing, encouraging, guiding, praying.

When I joined the Curriculum Committee at AMBS to work out the details of program planning for the next year it was unclear to me what the criteria were for making curriculum decisions. Some faculty members were operating from assumptions which guided the curriculum planning of the Biblical Seminary of New York. Several of them had graduated from that school and were appreciative of its emphases. Others found their orientation in the Anabaptist Vision. The case for including particular courses in the list of courses required for graduation was sometimes made on an ad hoc basis. The same was true when deciding whether a given course should be listed in the joint offerings column. There was not much elective space available; as a result courses in the required column and especially the courses listed in the joint column had the best chance of enrolling the most students.

When Harold Bender passed away at the beginning of the September 1962 academic year we were faced with the question whether his course in church history should be combined with the same course taught by CJ Dyck. What was the compelling case that required these courses to be offered separately? Were there differences of interpretation between Bender and Dyck so great and so crucial that we could not risk having the students from the other seminary exposed to that interpretation? Or was it simply a matter of "turf"? The issue was quickly resolved by combining the two classes and designating Professor CJ Dyck as the instructor. This early experiment proved so successful that the question of whether or not to combine these courses never arose again.

Over the next five years more and more classes were combined until finally a decision was made that all courses would be offered jointly. The Joint Coordinating Committee (JCC) monitored this process at its annual meetings and gave hearty approval. In the summer of 1969 the decision to relocate the Goshen program to the Elkhart campus was implemented.

Goshen College Biblical Seminary was administratively separated from Goshen College at this time and was renamed Goshen Biblical Seminary (GBS). There was no longer any reason to set aside separate rooms for Goshen faculty and students since all parties were now “at home” on a single campus.

The American Association of Theological Schools (AATS) gave strong leadership to its member schools during these years of transition and change. One issue that was discussed and decided was the most appropriate nomenclature for graduation from the basic 3 year theological program, the BD or the MDiv degree. The issue was vigorously debated at the Association’s 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 AATS and certainly not of the less prestigious members. Some 40 years later there are many DMin programs across North America.

There were three special initiatives sponsored by AATS beginning in the late 50s and continuing into the 60s. The first was a study of changes in seminary education among its member schools. The study was financed by the Carnegie Corporation and directed by H Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams and James M Gustafson. Niebuhr and Gustafson were both on the Yale faculty during the time I was a student there. It was rumored that Gustafson would be appointed to Niebuhr's chair in Ethics upon his retirement. (Gustafson was a member of the faculty examining committee when I sat for my comprehensives. He was also one of the readers of my dissertation.) Had I known the nature of my future assignment at AMBS, I would have interviewed one or both of them about their research. As it was I did read the three volume report which they wrote.

The study documented the changes taking place in seminary education but also had the effect of encouraging additional experiments to reform the curriculum. Volume 1, *The Nature of the Church and its Ministry*, 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 or criterion for assessing the appropriateness or relevance of the subject matter that is chosen as well as the unifying principle in building the program of study.

A second major study sponsored by AATS and directed by Charles Fielding of Toronto was called Education for Ministry. This study examined the patterns of supervision in field education and prepared recommendations for this dimension of seminary training. The publication of this report served notice that we were on the verge of some major changes in the ways we were equipping seminarians to be ready to enter their professions. Supervised experience in ministry was seen not only as a means of sharpening professional skills but as a cognate way to engage in theological reflection and research.

The Resources Planning Commission was still a third AATS initiative and presented its

report at the June 1968 meeting of the Association in St Louis. Their vision called for establishing clusters of theological schools (perhaps as many as twenty-five) which were ecumenical in character and in addition were plugged into the graduate schools of the major universities on whose campuses these clusters were located. This arrangement called into question the validity and integrity of schools like AMBS who were trying to do theological education on their own apart from the intellectual and theological stimulation of dialogue which such centers could provide. A few such centers were set up in places like Toronto, Chicago and the Bay Area in California. However, for the most part the expense and the energy such relocation required inhibited a mass movement in that direction.

Although AMBS did not buy into the proposed model we were faced with the challenge to rethink our program in light of its underlying assumptions. A major part of our reality was the fact that MBS had only recently moved away from the city where ecumenical and intellectual resources were readily available to its present location in the rural countryside of Northern Indiana. It would have been very difficult to return so soon after this major move. Nor was its partner (GCBS) eager to move away from its rural constituency for an urban setting which emphasized several values it had not yet come to appreciate.

This brief sketch of the cultural, social, religious and educational environment in which we found ourselves does not tell the whole story of the rapid changes taking place around us and among us. What a difference a decade makes! It does, however, make us aware that many challenges were facing these two Mennonite seminaries who had committed themselves to walk together into an as yet unknown and uncharted future. I personally entered the fray naively with confidence, enthusiasm and optimism believing that with God's guidance and supportive strength we would find the way through.

Of course I did not walk alone. There was the total faculty and the seminary administration who were supportive of this modest attempt to meet the challenges of our time. Many of them had given themselves in sacrificial ways and continued to do so believing that we would together discern God's leading for the next leg of the journey just as we had in the past.

When a representative of Lilly Endowment Inc approached us with encouragement to submit an application for a major grant which they could fund given their guidelines, the JAC proposed the following:

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 by the Anabaptist wing of the Reformation. Theological education among Mennonites has been of sufficiently brief duration that firm trends have not been established and new directions based on the best in our heritage which has contemporary significance can be set. We recognize that other studies have been done in the AATS and its member schools and that new directions are emerging. We are convinced, however, 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 Goshen College Biblical Seminary and Mennonite Biblical Seminary 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, Millard C Lind, William (Bill) Klassen, Leland Harder and John Howard Yoder.

JC Wenger, GCBS Professor of Historical Theology, was the senior member of the group. He was widely known throughout the church as a result of his many books and articles as well as his various ministries as a churchman. He had a vast knowledge of Mennonite history and practice, especially of the Swiss/South German stream of Anabaptists and their spiritual descendants.

He had recently prepared and delivered the Conrad Grebel lectures on the theme of the Mennonite view of the Scriptures which were later published by Herald Press under the title, *God's Word Written*. In 1965 he was invited to join the governing board of the NIV Bible translation project, a group of about one hundred evangelical scholars and was appointed to the executive committee which gave direction to the project.

CJ Dyck, MBS Professor of Historical Theology, provided historical perspective on the Dutch/Prussian/Russian stream of Anabaptists and their descendants. Like two covers of a book, JC and CJ were the authoritative sources of knowledge of European and American Mennonitism. CJ had for some time been researching and writing an introduction to Mennonite history which was widely used as a text book in Mennonite high schools and colleges. JC had also written a history of the Mennonites in America, a project which had been reassigned to him after Harold Bender's death. CJ was an official visitor at Vatican II in Rome giving him an ecumenical perspective unmatched by any other Mennonite. He served as the general editor in the Classics of the Radical Reformation (CRR) series. He was also as earlier noted the first director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies. While the IMS under his direction had a distinctive historical emphasis, the projects he directed were by no means limited to historical topics.

Millard C Lind, GCBS Professor of Old Testament, was one of two biblical scholars in the Seminar. His research interests centered on the topic of holy war in the Old Testament. Herald Press published his book, *Yahweh is a Warrior*, a book that has gained wide attention in the scholarly world and provoked considerable debate. His major contribution to the Seminar (among many) is his assertion that worship is a political activity.

Millard, providing the Old Testament input, took on the role of the front cover of the book of issues which surfaced in the Seminar. William (Bill) Klassen, MBS Professor of New Testament, represented the back cover of the book. Bill did his doctoral work at Princeton. He was one of the first of a long line of Mennonite biblical scholars to earn their doctorates at

Princeton or at another Reformed graduate school of theology. He brought to the Seminar an active interest in Anabaptist sources. His own special research interest focused on Pilgram Marpeck. In collaboration with Walter Klaassen the book *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* was published in the CRR series.

Both Millard and Bill brought to the table a keen interest in the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, the role of faith in relation to the critical study of the Bible, the need for a biblical hermeneutic, as well as a number of additional topics of contemporary relevance and concern, e.g., war and peace, worship, ministry, healing and health.

Leland Harder, MBS Professor of Practical Theology, joined the faculty when the seminary was still located in Chicago and served also as the pastor of the Woodlawn Mennonite Church. The congregation was an integral part of the seminary community. In drawing on his pastoral experience, his urban involvement and his recently completed doctorate in the sociology of religion, he brought to the faculty a distinctive contribution to the task of theological reflection, that is, empirical research. In addition to his academic interests and expertise, Leland had a concern for evangelism and Christian education as well as for the necessity of learning the skills of pastoral ministry in various settings. But more than this, he knew that the same process which promoted the development of ministering skills also contributed to the development of theological thought. Leland had an active interest in Anabaptist sources and undertook to edit a volume of the letters of Conrad Grebel published under the title *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism* in the CRR series.

John Howard Yoder, GCBS Professor of Theology and Ethics, taught a course called Introduction to Theology which drew many students. Another course was War, Peace and Revolution, a second of his major interests of which there were many. In addition to being a popular teacher he traveled extensively throughout North America and abroad where he was invited to preach and to lecture. John Howard translated and edited *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, the first volume in the CRR series.

During one of my sabbatical leaves I was designated research fellow of the office of family life education of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. The office was on the third floor of the WCC headquarters, right next to the office for the retired general secretary, Dr Visser't Hooft. When we first met, he inquired about John Howard in terms that made it clear that he had the highest regard and respect for John.

Some of his students and other interlocutors found John to be somewhat intimidating. He sometimes seemed angry in the way he spoke in a formal setting. He had both critics and disciples but he was rarely ignored or taken for granted by his listeners or his readers.

I came across a description of John Calvin by one of his biographers as the young theologian entered the city of Geneva, having been invited by Farel and the other city fathers to reorganize the city along Reformed lines. He is described as “a rather severe intense man, one who had a genius for organization. He had the spirit of an Old Testament law giver and the mind of an invincible ruler. He combined German depth of feeling, thought and soberness with French fire, practical good sense and fondness for plain logic. He was

irritable, grave and stern but capable nonetheless of lifelong and affectionate friendship.”

I find this description of Calvin fascinating all the more so because it seems to me that there are striking similarities in the personalities of these two theologians separated by years, by miles and by their theological presuppositions and conclusions.

And so we began our trip of exploration of the Free Church heritage. There were moments of disappointment, disagreement and frustration, times when we (at least I) wished that we had never set out on this “adventure” and wondering whether there was some graceful way of terminating the process. Sometimes we were weary, sometimes we were locked in disagreement, sometimes we were bored by the subject matter or by the unwillingness of the others to be more flexible in trying to reach a consensus. But now and then our spirits were lifted as we came to resolution on an issue small or great and were able to say in the words so dear to Free Churchmen that “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”.

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January 27, 2005