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June, 1933

Preliminary Report of the Commission on Religion

Since March 21, when the Commission on Religion held its first meeting, it has been carrying on a study of the needs and possibilities for religious activity within the college community.

One basis for investigation lay in the Sunday meetings. Many types of vesper service were essayed with the view of testing their relative success and influence. At a recent meeting of the Commission it was decided that they have, on the whole, been worthwhile. It was then pointed out that, although we had started out to provide purely religious services, we gradually broadened our programs to include such secular elements as European lullabys, piano recitals, and nature poetry. But it appeared that those meetings which had been quite aesthetic in character were just as successful as those which had been more strictly religious. This brought us to one of the chief questions which the Commission has to face: should we advocate the provision for some kind of Sunday entertainment, which shall be attractive to the whole community, or should we attempt to satisfy those persons who especially desire some form of religious exercise at the college on Sundays? Our tentative decision on this matter will be presented later.

In the meantime, the other basis for investigation, namely that of personal interviews, must be considered. Owing to the impossibility of elucidating accurate generalities from so many individual opinions, our statistics are not to be taken too seriously. A few of the more indicative results, however, are stated here for general interest. In a census based on the reports of one hundred community members, it was found that with regard to church attendance:

- 42% had been brought up to attend church regularly)
- 41% " " " " " " " " very irregularly)
- 17% have rarely been to church at all

and that:

- 11% have gone to church regularly at Bennington)
- 25% " " " " occasionally ")
- 63% have not gone to church at all at Bennington)

As to the form of service desired at the college, a great many different suggestions were forthcoming: in the first place, almost everyone felt that some kind of service should be held. On the other hand, there were about eight people who felt absolutely no need for any religious expression by the college at all. There was a greater demand for music than for anything else. But almost as universal was the expressed desire for occasional speakers and group discussion on the religious questions of today. Some wanted more formality, while others asked for continued variety in the type of service throughout the year, so as to include poetry reading, etc. We have received from individuals outside the college as well as within, many other suggestions, including the one of the building of a chapel or of some definite place, whether outside or in, which would be devoted exclusively to religious purposes.

One of the conclusions arrived at by the commission through these observations centered about the advisability of continuing the meetings. Several arguments in their favor were brought forward: they give an opportunity to all those within reach for meeting in one group on the day when most people have been more or less independently occupied; they allow for a period of repose and quiet enjoyment at the end of the day; and can provide the whole community with a time for peaceful, aesthetic appreciation, or spiritual meditation, neither of which is usually found in the community meetings and discussions during the week. Most of these arguments, it was pointed out, imply the recognition of all types of service, from the strictly religious to the most secular.

In connection with this, our second conclusion regarded the function of the commission in relation to the immediate needs of the college. Seeing that a large majority feels there should be some Sunday exercise, that there are some who want a definite opportunity for religious expression through a college group, and that we were appointed to "study the religious life and needs of the college," we have decided that we must confine our function more strictly to the provision for religious activity. This will mean the elimination of all those features which do not purport to engender religious feeling or deal with religious questions. Such a stipulation will not, however, limit the breadth of approach. Poetry, music, reading, discussion, speakers, and songs may all be used provided they are essentially religious in character.

Our third conclusion deals with the bigger problem of the development of the religious policy of the college. As we have so far made no real progress towards solving it, we propose that it take first place in the work of the commission next term. Furthermore, we propose that, as this college is primarily an educational institution, the commission use the educational policy and the philosophy behind it as the starting point for its study of this problem.

Based upon the foregoing observations and conclusions, we wish to make the following recommendations: that the Sunday vesper services be continued next year, with the intention of providing some kind of religious activity for those in the community who desire it--no matter how few or how many they may be; and that these services be arranged for and conducted by the Commission on Religion.

*See later
Minutes
of
Commission*

Respectfully submitted,

Margo Suter, Secretary