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March 21, 1933

Commission on Religion

*Kathleen Hartt, Elizabeth Bennett  
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At the suggestion of the student committee on educational policy, the following have been appointed to serve as members of the Commission on Religion and Religious Life of the College: ~~Caroline Allen~~, Yvette Hardman, Mary Hooker, Margo Suter, Jane Woodhouse, and (from the faculty) Miss Ursula Rossmann. The commission has been charged with the responsibility of conducting the Sunday services for the remainder of the academic year and also to undertake a thorough and comprehensive study of the religious life and needs of the college, to report its findings together with such recommendations as it may wish to make not later than March 1, 1934, with a preliminary report on or before June 1 of this year.

The organization suggested for each of the commissions of the college has been as follows: a faculty chairman to preside at meetings, guide discussion, and suggest lines of investigation; a student secretary to act as executive of the group, to take an important part in gathering material and carrying through the work of investigation; if possible, a student clerk to keep notes and to prepare accurate summaries of valuable ideas gained at hearings and discussions. The methods of the commissions include individual gathering of written and other material, discussion, visits to other institutions or places where plans worthy of close study are in operation, holding of hearings where interested members of the community and experts from the outside present ideas and exchange views with members of the Commission, a final report to the President and through him to the college community, to the trustees or to both. Participation on Commissions is considered a regular part of student curriculum work. The college cooperates in every way possible to make investigations as thorough as possible.

As a starting point for the commission's work I should like to make a statement of the policy of the college with regard to religion so far as it has been developed:

Bennington College is tremendously interested in the problem of religion in relation to its students and faculty. The observable decline in effectiveness of official religious institutions in their appeal to a large part of the general population means a gradual breakdown both in traditional sanctions for conduct and secure personal philosophies of living. It means for our college students novel problems of ethics; it raises for all of us the problem of developing personalities with ability to meet the inevitable tragedies of life with serenity and balance. Our feeling is that these needs are not satisfactorily met by reproducing the traditional collegiate religious institutions.

The college has no denominational origin or purpose. In no way does it wish to suggest any sectarian preference or by its program to leave outside the pale any of its students. It believes that present day youth looks in the direction of institutions and beliefs which unite men and women of different nationalities, races, and backgrounds rather than separate them.

On the other hand, a first feature of our program is the recognition of the denominational approach to religion. There is no official college exercise on Sunday morning. We provide free transportation for students who wish to attend religious services in the town. It happens that Bennington has an

excellent clergy of the predominant denominations. We believe that voluntary participation in the services and activities of these churches, in the cases of students who find in them the means of spiritual growth is sounder than attempting to create our own necessarily undenominational service for Unitarians, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Christian Scientists, Quakers, Jews, and Roman Catholics alike.

The second fundamental feature of our program is instruction in the field of philosophy, ethics, and religion similar in character and quality to that given in other fields. We have been seeking for this position a person of the highest intellectual and personal qualifications. Thus far our search has been unrewarded. But as soon as the right person has been found this second feature of our program will be firmly established. Delay in getting it under way is due not to our feeling of its unimportance but of its very great importance. In the meantime we have an organized group studying an important aspect of the subject under able faculty guidance. *no longer true*

In the third feature of our program, that of building up our own institutional forms or expression for needs not satisfied by denominational services, we have made only tentative beginnings. There has been a regular Sunday afternoon or evening service with small student attendance and smaller faculty attendance. These do not satisfy us. We are agreed that what we have should grow out of need. Some of us feel that the need for creative affirmation in ritual, expression in philosophy, and faith, of the great human values of our age, perhaps of all ages, is an urgent one for our group. This must be a gradual growth in which, perhaps, we shall play a very small part. But to lay the groundwork in our unhampered situation is the great opportunity of the Commission. *Sunday serv. suff.*

Robert D. Leigh  
President