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The Student Association—An Evaluation

By JOHN GIENAPP

President, Concordia Seminary Students' Association

"How does it feel to be top flea on a dead dog?" The wry question addressed to a student association president dramatizes a reality in the life of the association. That reality is the need for reevaluation. It is axiomatic that one thing always present at a seminary is change. The complex equilibrium necessary for theological endeavor at Concordia Seminary has been maintained for 125 years by constant change. The student body changes with precise regularity. The faculty and staff, the buildings, and even the location of the seminary change through the years. More subtle are the changes of needs and wants within the student body. These latter changes primarily are what cause the Students' Association to reevaluate its role in the life of the seminary.

The changes that have occurred in the needs and wants, the attitudes and expectations, of the student at Concordia Seminary are hard to pinpoint. Several of them are the result of an older, somewhat more mature student body. There is a greater diversity of tastes and interests. There is a wider range of background and experience. There is familiarity with academic disciplines outside of theology, and a pressing toward better understanding of the disciplines within theology itself. Further changes result from the demands of the curriculum, particularly required fieldwork, which have cut substantial wedges out of time that was previously left for the students' own pursuits. Changing policies of the seminary and increased economic op-

portunity have resulted in more married students. Although each change may seem insignificant by itself, the cumulative effect of the change is such that it calls into question some of the basic approaches to student government on campus.

The Students' Association has provided good solutions to some of the basic needs of the student body in the past. In doing this it has not only contributed to the welfare of the students themselves but also made an outstanding contribution to the seminary as a whole. The students together pioneered many of the student services now considered a normal and necessary part of seminary life. No one could seriously imagine a seminary without meal service, without health services, and without a program and equipment for organized physical recreation. Each of these programs was initiated or supervised at one time by the students themselves. As the necessity for such programs was recognized, the administration of the seminary assumed responsibility for them. This freed the students for creative responsibility in other areas.

In recent years some of the needs of the students have been met in new areas. The Students' Association was incorporated in the State of Missouri as a legal, nonprofit corporation. In this form it controlled student enterprises including a bookstore, a barbershop, a printshop, and a snack bar. In these areas the work of the students was, with few exceptions, outstanding. The bookstore stocked and sold a wide selec-

tion of theological texts. The dollar volume of business from this and other enterprises rose to over \$100,000 a year. From the profits of these enterprises, the Students' Association was able to develop programs to benefit the students in other ways. A theological lectureship was developed. An organ concert by a world famous organist became an annual event. The *Seminarian* fostered discussion and growth among classmates and students at other seminaries, reaching even some of the seminaries of Europe. Opportunities were developed for friendship and exchange with the sister seminary in Springfield. The seminary chorus helped to bring the Word of God and the image of the seminary to thousands of people in many parts of the country. All this was done as a contribution to the life and growth of the seminary as a whole.

At the Cleveland convention, however, the Synod enacted a resolution which has had profound effects on the Students' Association. This resolution required the Board for Higher Education through the Board of Control of the seminary to exercise direct control of the business enterprises. In spite of vocal opposition on the part of members of the Students' Association, who felt that their interests were in danger, the business enterprises were transferred to the seminary. Today, some 18 months after the transfer, it is still too early to tell what permanent effects the transfer will have on the capabilities of these enterprises to meet the needs of the students efficiently.

The effect of the transfer, however, has reached beyond the enterprises themselves. It has brought out into the open problems which have slowly developed as the student body changed. These problems have been

noticed but ignored, because the leaders of the student government have been concerned with running the business enterprises and other services well. The symptom of these problems is general apathy among the students toward the formal governmental structure and toward some of its programs. Each year it is a struggle to get candidates to run for office. Seldom can more than two for any office be coerced into running. Association meetings attract only a small percentage of the students. Dormitory meetings seldom involve more than half of the residents. Among the married students the governmental structure is flabby with disuse. Students stay away from organized activities, sports, convocations, and some other programs in droves. All this is symptomatic of the problems. At the heart of them is the fact that the needs of the student body have changed. The Students' Association must change too or it will be the dead dog that it has been accused of being.

What are the faults? Where does the association fail? There are several places. The association is burdened with an outworn structure. The dormitory council system is entirely out of date. It is impossible to attempt to have a cohesive dormitory unit with the varied schedules of dormitory life at this level. The structure of the association fails to bridge the vast gap between the fourth-year class and the other classes adequately. The association is not flexible enough in its budget. Presently the budget must be drawn up nearly a year in advance by people who will neither spend it nor administer it. Long-range planning is hindered by the discontinuity resulting from the absence from the campus of the whole third-year

class. Finally, specific programs which merely entertain or inform superficially no longer meet any need on campus.

In spite of failures and general apathy, the Students' Association need not die. It can still serve a useful function for the students themselves and for the seminary at large. In fact, without such things as a daily bulletin, mail service, a campus newspaper, sacristans and ushers, people to plan Concordia Day and the Quad Show, campus life would be less pleasant than it is now. However, these things need not be done with the structure that we presently have.

Much more important are the pressing needs of students on campus that are not met by the seminary. As yet the married students are only vaguely assimilated into the way of seminary life. Much more needs to be done in this area. Initiative will come only from the students themselves. Personal maturity and wholesome attitudes toward parish life in the church can be fostered by interchange between the fourth-year and first- and second-year classes. More must be done here, and several creative solutions on an informal basis are possible.

One area that has consistently received enthusiastic response from students has been that of stimulating theological discussion. From the students' point of view no lecture series on campus has been as stimulating as the Lyceum lectures, which

have brought Samuel Terrien, Bruce Metzger, and Krister Stendahl to the seminary and the St. Louis community. More of this and less of pure entertainment can serve the seminary, the church, and the community better. Discussion between seminarians of several traditions can be encouraged. Obviously it is unlikely that a seminarian who has never talked to knowledgeable men of other traditions will properly understand his own tradition and be a good representative of it, even though he may have a theological diploma. The students have recognized this and have initiated an organized response to it. This program meets the seminarian precisely where he has needs; consequently it has received good response. The student's voice also needs to be heard critically and constructively in academic affairs.

In short, the role of the Students' Association is a precarious but challenging one. It totters on the brink of destruction. If it fails to change in response to real needs, it will crash to splintered oblivion. But if it can reassess its function, it can serve the students and the seminary mightily. The difficulty will be that the area in which it must work is hardly susceptible to gimmick or programs or easy organization. It will require insight, dedication, and perseverance to pioneer in hitherto untouched areas of student life. If it succeeds, it will contribute much both to the seminary and to the life of the church.