

This is the third part of our interview with President Emeritus Thomas A. Spragens, and today is November 10, 1982. We are again interviewing in Mr. Spragen's office. We left off yesterday talking about the Day of Concern in 1970 following Kent State. I have one very brief follow-up question. You seemed to be more than a step ahead of some of the changes that were taking place when you delivered a Convocation address entitled "Beyond Protest" in 1965; yet it seemed as if a number of college administrators were completely caught off guard by some of these changes. They had seemed rather bewildered by what was happening on campus. Could you discuss the background of that address and give some of your insights on the subject?

That was 1965. I recall the address; it was simply a reflection on developing attitudes on campuses around the country where the protests of some form or another, systematic and sometimes confrontational, were developing. As we know, that tendency seemed to take hold on the West Coast earliest. It was part of the public record at the time that these things were taking place.

You didn't seem as surprised by it. It seems as if some college administrators were genuinely surprised that this was taking place--that they were becoming activists.

Well, they knew it was happening, but somehow they didn't know it was happening on their campuses. The primary reason is that senior college administrators, that is college presidents, generally during the '60s were so preoccupied with matters fiscal and developmental that they tended to maintain very little contact with students; partly a function of size and partly a function of complexity in the organization and leadership of an institution. I always have said that at Centre we managed our concerns better because we were small.

We had moved into the day of "sit-ins", you know, even earlier than 1965; some of the earliest having to do with efforts to secure racial equity. I think the first sit-ins were blacks sitting on lunch counter stools in drug stores that had a white-only service attitude.

We were wrestling with those issues on our campus just as any other institution in the country. We were a college of 600-700 students. Everyone knows everyone else in that kind of situation. I don't mean to say that the president of Centre College can know all the students at the College. But fundamentally you were dealing not with strangers but with persons you knew. In larger institutions the distance between the president of the institution and individual students sometimes was a yawning gulf. I served as a member of the board of the American Council on Education in the late '60s. I really have forgotten the term of my office; it may have begun in '68, it may have terminated in '68--those were three-year terms. But in any event, I recall at that time serving with Grayson Kirk, who was then the president of Columbia University, and Fred Harrington who was president of the University of Wisconsin; and it seems to me there was yet another whose campus turned into a tumultuous spot. I once flew on the same plane to New York with Grayson Kirk following a meeting in Washington. He was returning to his campus, and I was off to call on some foundations. We found ourselves seated together. He seemed to have no concern at all about unrest on his campus, but only three weeks after that the administrative offices were occupied, and a very, very sharp and difficult confrontation developed there which ultimately involved the city police. It was a very unfortunate thing.

I don't mean to accuse Dr. Kirk of being an insensitive person. The nature of the organization of Columbia University was one that had him spending most of his time down in the financial district or down in midtown while others were tending shop on the campus. Being the urban university it is, although they have a large residential undergraduate enrollment, faculty and administrators tend to live at great distances from the campus. They commute in from New Jersey and that sort of thing. So neither administrators nor faculty in institutions situated like that can have a sense of the general attitudes of students. But it's quite different here. I always said that I felt students at Centre College would be a little bit embarrassed to occupy the office of the dean or the president. We just know each other too well! I recall saying half in jest to a student group at one time, "If it ever seems desirable, why, a couple of you are perfectly welcome to camp out in my office, if I may go sleep in your bed." It's a matter of scale.

Could you talk a little bit about how relations have progressed or changed between Centre and the Presbyterian Church? or have there not been any changes during your time in office?

Yes, there have been a number of changes. They are not changes that are simply singular at Centre, let me say. The relationships of many traditionally church-related colleges to the church as an institution have changed quite a lot since 1957.

One of the changes which took place here following my coming involved a modification of our charter as it affected the way in which trustees were named.

A year in advance of my coming there had developed some stress between the trustees of the College and the Synods of Kentucky. (There are two Synods of Kentucky, one related to the northern or the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the other to the southern Church, the Presbyterian Church in the United States.) Centre was related to both those two major branches of Presbyterianism, and through the Synods of Kentucky there had been an arrangement under which Centre trustees were elected by the trustees but subject to confirmation by the Synods. That arrangement had existed since around 1920 or thereabouts. The original relationship of the Church and College go back to 1824, five years after the College was founded. For decades after that the Synod(s) elected the College trustees. Then about 1903 or 1904 there was a dissolution of explicit church governance arrangements. That change was undertaken by mutual agreement to allow Centre to qualify for participation in the first national retirement system for college trustees, one which was created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and which was wholly funded by them. Centre was one of a half-hundred institutions they selected to take under their wing, to fund retirement pensions for their faculties. Carnegie was not prepared to accept into their program church-related institutions. Centre, with Synod concurrence, withdrew from any formal relationship to the Church and maintained that position until the 1920s. By that time the old Carnegie retirement system had outgrown itself. The Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association (TIAA) had been set up with Carnegie assistance, and participation in the TIAA program became available to all institutions--public and private, church-related or wholly independent. The Kentucky Presbyterians had missed having a sponsorship of the College, so a renewed arrangement was undertaken around 1920 under which the trustees, though elected by the board, became subject to confirmation by the Synods.

In the summer of 1957 the Synods declined to confirm the election of two persons that had been that spring elected in the normal course of elections to

additional four-year terms. They were in this instance trustees already sitting who had been confirmed by the synods four years earlier; but in this instance there was some feeling on the part of some on the floor of the Synod that these persons were espousing positions that were contrary to positions approved by the Church and in considerable part having to do with the question of racial integration. The issues had become oversimplified on both sides. In reality, they really were not far apart. But in any event, the Synod, on the recommendation of one of its committees which had not consulted earlier with the leadership of the trustees of the College, simply declined to confirm those two persons. Only later was it apparent that if successors were not named to persons whose terms had expired, they continued under Kentucky law to serve until their successors were qualified and inducted. Since in this instance the men were already on the board, they continued in service.

Well, the Synod and the trustees agreed that they ought to work out some arrangement that removed that kind of ambiguity in any event; and after a bit of study they had adopted an arrangement modifying the charter of the College to provide that the Synods would directly elect a third of the board, the alumni of the College would directly elect a third, and the trustees would elect a third of the board. Everyone seemed to feel that was the best way of resolving the issue at the time.

I had considerable doubts about the effectiveness of a board composed of representatives of three different constituencies in the long run. That led me to early suggest to the board and to the appropriate committee of the Synods that we ought to examine the matter a bit further.

I did that during my first year in office with some sense that if it were going to be changed that would be the best time. There's always a honeymoon period for new administrators. I knew from my earlier years in Kentucky some of the persons who represented the Synod; and the chairman of that committee had been pastor of my home church when I was of college age. Together we sat down and looked again at the thing. I suggested that we seek again some arrangement that would allow the whole board to be constructed as a team. My analogy was to organization of a football team; almost certainly if you had three separate coaches, every one of them would want to name the quarterback. We had three separate constituencies, each electing persons who reflected their views, with the possibility of setting up internal tensions that could be exaggerated by the fact of this separated responsibility. Happily, in 1958 the charter was amended again by agreement of all the parties. We then provided for a board to be wholly elected by the trustees themselves, but provided for rotation so that there could not develop an unhealthy self-perpetuation. No trustee could ever sit on his own nomination for election to another term. He or she had to be rotated off before his name could even be considered again. That was a change which took place in 1958. A few years later we had considered the questions of other restrictions that were in the charter as it then existed; namely, 1) that the president of the College must be a member of the Presbyterian Church or some other Reformed Church; for example, the Dutch Reformed Church in America, or other Calvinist-descended churches; 2) that all professors were required to be members of the Presbyterian Church. Excuse me, I think I've erred--the president had to be Presbyterian, the professors had to be Presbyterians or members of other churches in the reformed tradition. (Now, they had begun to interpret that very broadly--really the Episcopal Church would not have qualified by standard definition, but there were Episcopalians on the faculty.) There were no Roman Catholics, however, and no non-Christians on the faculty, expect for persons perhaps who might be serving just an interim appointment. The

College had felt free to assume that it could make short-term appointments of persons who didn't take that standing. But by agreement with the Church the faculty restriction was removed from the charter, as was the requirement that the president should be a Presbyterian.

Do you recall what date this particular provision was changed?

Having looked here at one of the papers in my office, I believe that the requirement that the president be Presbyterian was eliminated in 1958, along with the change in the arrangements for the election of the board. I'm not entirely clear about that; there were changes made in 1968, and I think perhaps yet another time during that ten-year period from '58 to '68 when other changes were made.

In 1968 or '69 the provision in the charter which required consent of the Synod to change the charter of the College was removed altogether. So there is now no organic or constitutional relationship between the College and the Church. The College had continued to maintain a cooperating relationship and was supported by the Church until 1968-69 when the College volunteered to withdraw from the support budget of the Church because the Church was having great difficulty finding adequate resources to fulfill their commitments to Centre College and to Lees Junior College in Jackson and Pikeville College in Pikeville, as well as to the Presbyterian Seminary located in Louisville. In a year in which we had received a gift of about a million-and-a-half dollars from the estate of one Presbyterian layman in the state, after some discussion, the board authorized me to advise the Synod that we would refrain from making any requests to them for financial support. That did become the fact in 1968 or '69. We continued to report to the Church, to have a annual visit from a committee of the Synod; and that persisted until the Presbyterian Church, both the so-called Northern Church (the UPUSA Church) and the Southern Church (the US Church) reorganized their Synods. Whereas we had been thereto related to a Synod of Kentucky in both denominations, both Synods now became enlarged, so-called regional Synods. The Northern Church placed us in a Synod including the states of Michigan, Ohio, and Kentucky; but in the Southern Church the structure was understandably one in which Kentucky became the northern territory of an enlarged Synod. Kentucky became associated in the Synod with Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee.

This meant that in maintaining two Synodical relationships we would be undertaking to stretch ourselves from Sault Sainte Marie to Mobile Bay. At the same time the churches were restructuring their relationship to institutions. In some of those state-boundary Synods, the smaller Synods, there had been a tradition of giving rather extensively in support of colleges; in others the financial support capabilities of the Synod was far more restricting. And in Kentucky, for the reasons I have suggested, there were three Presbyterian-related institutions in a state that had altogether in it only about 50,000 Presbyterians.

When they began to reorganize the Synods, it appeared that these Kentucky institutions would be laying claim, as it were, to a share based on the new structures that might be draining off money from institutions in the other states which had come into those two new Synods.

After discussion we advised both Synods, because each Synod was trying to provide a uniform basis of relating to all institutions that were in cooperating relationships with it, that we would simply withdraw from maintaining any formal relationship to either Synod. That would remove the question of whether Centre would become an object of financial support. But in doing so, we said that we

would be prepared later, if they wished to do so, to renew a cooperating relationship with the new regional Synods after they had had an opportunity to work through all their policies. It took a matter of several years for the Synods to work out their new structures and their new relationships. But about three years ago first the northern Synod--the Synod of the Covenant, involving Michigan and Ohio and Kentucky--did ask us to explore with them the renewal of a formal relationship. We did that under a memorandum of agreement, and two-and-a-half years ago the Synod began to make limited support contributions to Centre. We reported to the Synod of the Mid-South, that is, the Synod within whose bounds we were for the Southern Church, that we had established the relationship to Synod of the Covenant and would be happy, if they wished, to consider with them a similar relationship. Studies were still going on in the Southern wing of the Church about the appropriate basis for relationships, but, in any event, in the Spring of this year, 1982, the Synod of the Mid-South and the trustees of the College signed a document which provided for the establishment of a cooperating relationship with the Synod of the Mid-South.

So today Centre is again related in terms of cooperative relationships to both the UPUSA Church and the US Church. Under the present normative patterns in the Church there are just written memoranda of agreement, which in the Southern Church they call a Covenant. These agreements are subject to reexamination periodically to provide renewal or termination at the will of the parties.

My feeling personally has always been that the long-standing relationship of the College and the Presbyterian Church was a useful relationship, and it was one that reflected the historic position of this institution. I'm personally happy that agreements exist between the College and the Church under which the Church exercises no external control over the College in any sense, but through which, under mutually supporting agreements, the Church gives some financial support and other kinds of evidences of its bona fides to the College.

Over the period of twenty-five years we at Centre saw quite a bit of change, but also we saw a great change in the larger scene in the way in which churches related to colleges. It is true that some colleges are still today--in legal terms--properties of, or owned by, church denominations. There are no Presbyterian colleges where that's the case, but there are those where the charter provides that if the college ceased to exist, its assets--the disposition of its assets--would be determined by the church rather than by the trustees of the College. In Centre's case that does not apply. If Centre, for any reason, should cease to exist, its assets would be disposed of by the trustees in whatever way they saw fit in the pursuit of the purposes which the College's endowments and resources existed to serve earlier.

How would you characterize the relationship between Centre and the community of Danville over the years? What would you say were the greatest areas of cooperation? the greatest areas of disagreement or conflict?

During my quarter of a century with the College I have always felt the relationship with the community has been a very satisfactory relationship. Certainly if you are thinking about official relationships, that is of the College and the government of the town or of the county, or whatever, there has always been cordial and mutually supportive relationships; but if one just thinks in terms of the general sense of approval or disapproval, or cordiality or suspicion, with the whole community, the relationship, I would say, is uniquely good and affirmative.

There have been times when there have been some anxieties in the community about whether the College in its posture may be disserving the community, but that would represent a minority point of view.

I can't really think of any major problem of stress between the College and the community. The worst--perhaps the area where there may have been considerable feeling of disagreement--had to do with use of the College athletic facilities by the local high school or high schools.

Going back to about 1948, the Danville school board and Centre had worked out an agreement under which the Centre College stadium was lighted. The community helped to provide funds to put up the lights, and Centre in turn agreed to make the field available for the use of the football team at Danville High School. Danville had previously played on a field that was on its own grounds, which were then immediately adjacent to the College, but they did not have the seating capacity that the Centre stadium provided. As we moved into the latter part of the '60s, the uses of the facilities, both by the College and the high school, were more demanding than they had been earlier. High schools particularly in Kentucky began to play longer schedules, and the wear and tear on the field was more than it could effectively stand.

There were also larger crowds. The high school games being played there on the campus immediately behind the library on Friday nights were in some ways disruptive to the normal life of the campus in ways that exceeded what existed in 1948, let us say, when all this had been arranged. So at a given point early in the '60s when the lights needed replacement, the College said to the school board that it would be happy to have them replace them; but the College had given up playing night games, and we said to the school board we would not want a replacement of the lights to imply any long-range commitment to continued use by the high school. "You may put them up, they will be your property, and subject to your removal at any time you might choose to do so." At the time, we were anticipating building the Regional Arts Center, a facility designed to accommodate 1500 persons. We anticipated concerts from time to time, large events, in the concert hall that could fall in conflict with the high school's use of the stadium.

The high school had built a gymnasium of their own, after using Centre's gymnasium in the late 1950s for their basketball games as well. There were some difficulties of scheduling as well as the element of disruption of the normal tenor of the campus when high school events were going on in the gymnasium. With a much larger student body we needed that floor more extensively for intramural sports and so on. So we were delighted when in the early '60s the high school acquired a gymnasium with a larger seating capacity than the College.

When we moved actively into building the Arts Center, we put the school board on notice that at the time the Arts Center came into use (and this was a two or two-and-a-half-year or three-year advance notice) we would probably need to forego the agreement for their continued use of the stadium. That aroused some sense of dismay on the part of a certain part of the community; they felt that was unreasonable perhaps. It did result in the high school building a new stadium which is more capacious than the Centre stadium. We then removed one side of our stadium so rather than having two stands there is only the west stand. This enabled us to build a fully standard track within the area of the stadium.

This was perhaps the area where we were criticized within the community, but that didn't represent an overwhelming antagonism; and I think everyone is agreed

we are all better off under the arrangement which has been worked out.

The police department of the city has, through all the time I have been here, been quite cooperative with the College; and maintains effective liaison with the dean of students of the College with respect to matters where students may get involved in misdemeanors or otherwise become afoul of the law. I really could not expect at any time a better harmony of relationships between town and gown than existed here. I think I did mention that at the time of that so-called "Day of Concern" back in the Kent State spring, there were anxieties in the town about demonstrations on the campus; but on the other hand, there was great support as well. After the fact I think the community--well, I know the community--felt and expressed great praise for the students of the College and for the College community in the way in which it carried on its responsibilities during that particular time.

Any incident, of course, that appears in the papers always seems to draw more attention than day-to-day harmony between town and College. I did want to ask you how you recall the--it was referred to, I guess, as the barbershop picketing? I believe some Centre students were picketing. How do you recall that? Was there any anxieties on the part of the Community? or was that too isolated?

I recall that there was considerable resentment in the community over the fact that students at the College began to picket barbershops here in the community for not accomodating persons without regard to race. Here the community, I think, felt students had ceased playing and gone to meddling. A sense of tension existed there, there's no question about that, but it did resolve after a period of time in which picketing was carried on. The picketing was soon discontinued, but was never violent and the students had made their point that they disapproved of that apparent anachronism in the practices of a community which otherwise seemed to have gone beyond segregative practices in its services and facilities.

Some of the students later took the matter into the federal court system and secured a ruling that enjoined the barbershops of Danville from discriminating on racial grounds. No one seemed bothered by that when it came about in that way, even though it was, I think, the first instance in which that had been adjudicated in a federal court. It was a bit of a precedent when that took place. But I suspect 80 percent of the people in Danville never knew that the decision had been handed down, but the proprietors of some of the barbershops were upset by it.

I do remember the then city attorney solicited my assistance in, if you please, ordering students not to maintain this picket line. I declined on the ground that it was really not within my province so to instruct them, and I thought that the issues to the extent that there were issues had to do with the governance of the community and not with the governance of the College. Whatever temporary disagreements existed long since have washed away, as is always the case. I don't think that tensions between the community and college have ever been greater than tensions that rise internally within the community with respect to a lot of issues over which reasonable people disagree.

I have proudly said over the years that this is one of the finest college towns I know because of its sense of harmony; the College does not undertake to dominate the community and is not large enough to, and the community does not undertake to dominate or govern the College. There is a great sense of appreciation of the College, and of the town by students. Though they often complain about Danville being too small and one thing and another, the numbers of graduates of this College

who would say to you, "I'd love to come back." are legion.

Tape 3, Side 2 (Part 6) Thomas A Spragens Interview (continued)

Transcribed May 20, 1985. Edited by Dr. Spragens. Retyped October 1, 1985.