

Same Student Different Centuries: Talking To Two Presidents

BY RON GUSTAFSON

AS A CSP GRADUATE and former Editor-in-Chief of “The Sword,” I’ve returned to campus as a visiting student. My visit coincides with the upcoming Golden 50th Anniversary of my 1972 graduating class. This article is a reflection on my long-ago meeting, as the editor at age 20 with President Poehler, and my recent meeting with President Friedrich (age classified). I met and interviewed our current President in the context of my having returned to “The Sword” as a Cub Reporter.

Years ago in my student mailbox, I got a note saying President Poehler requested a meeting with me to discuss concerns about “The Sword.” Not an invitation—it was more of a summons. As an on-campus junior, I had not previously met him. At that time, in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), there was a Teaching Staff-Related Doctrinal Controversy in full swing. CSP Theology Professor Dr. Walter Wifall had just been dismissed over not adhering closely enough to the LCMS precept of Inerrancy of Scripture. This purging of staff was going on throughout LCMS schools, eventually including the prestigious Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

Professor Wifall was popular on campus and students had initiated a petition to keep him. Around half the student body had signed a “We Want Wifall” petition. It didn’t work. “The Sword” published letters to the editor that were critical of the administration. I wrote an editorial responding to accusations and criticisms that had been directed at “The Sword” for defending Professor Wifall. Our own small-scale student newspaper even got nationwide attention in this.

A rebuke came from the highly influential ultraconservative doctrinal proponent Herman Otten, a national publisher of his so-called “Christian

News.” President Poehler opened our meeting with a reminder that I served in my (volunteer) position as editor at the discretion of the College. He did not initially bring up the Wifall controversy. His admonishment was regarding information I had intended for a small Around-The-Town section. I had listed (not recommended) a local movie theatre showing a highly controversial political and erotic Swedish film “I Am Curious Yellow.” While X-rated, Courts had recently ruled it was not pornographic. The listing had been approved, I thought, by Faculty Staff Advisor, Professor Fred Bartling. It was intercepted, however, and never made it to press.

President Poehler made his case asking if I knew the daughter of Synod President Jacob Preus was a student here? Did I realize the College paper was often sent home to students’ parents? Did I understand it was not acceptable to list entertainment information, or anything, that was not compatible with the schools’ strong Christian ethics? I recall apologizing, admitting a lapse in judgment.

President Poehler went on to acknowledge the Professor Wifall controversy and dismissal and the paper’s coverage. I recall him saying while it was unfortunate, it was over, and time to move on. He did not tell me to stop covering it. He did say it would be helpful to let it go. He did not bring up that the paper, and by association CSP, had been criticized by Herman Otten. I’ve written about it now in 2022 to let current students know CSP once demanded religious doctrinal conformity.

It is worth mentioning another example of the CSP administration’s insistence on conformity at that time. A female student in the pre-deaconess program was asked to withdraw because of “her appearance.” Some other female students in



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