

Religious concerns mark history of Indiana University

As a state-supported public institution, Indiana University is strictly non-sectarian and takes no official position on any religious issue. It was not always so.

Frustration over the early predominance of professors who were Presbyterian at Indiana University eventually led to the founding of DePauw University in 1835. Though all of the participants in the IU controversy thought they were right, the argument had descended into the realms of the ridiculous.

Some Methodists had charged that the professors and the president were consciously or unconsciously slipping Presbyterian doctrine into the intellectual diet of students. Students were required to attend chapel services conducted by the university president or a designated professor.

One Presbyterian legislator, Samuel Bigger of Rushville, added fuel



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

to the controversy by flippantly remarking that, "there was not a Methodist in America with sufficient learning to fill a professor's chair if it were tendered to him." The remark came back to haunt him.

During the controversy and before the founding of DePauw, one IU trustee, a Methodist, came up with what he thought might be a compromise. Chester Ballard, a Monroe County physician, suggested the founding of a Wesley chair at the university.

That would level the denomina-

tional playing field for students. The proposal never came to pass, but the trustees did hire a Methodist professor. In time, IU even had a Methodist president, Cyrus Nutt, who was inaugurated in 1860.

The issue of seeing to the religious needs of students while they were away from their home communities came up again in 1910. On the front page of the *Bloomington Evening World* of Nov. 19 there was an article about the idea of establishing a "Bible chair" at IU. The sponsor would be the Christian Church.

Apparently concern about the religious welfare of students was at the heart of the proposal, rather than any fear that the university had drifted into sectarianism. Nor did the idea of establishing a Bible chair originate in Bloomington.

According to the *Evening World*, "The Christian Church in the State

of Indiana has taken the initial steps to the establishment of a Bible chair at Indiana University. This is the form which the work among students at state universities usually takes. The church has similar institutions at the Universities of Texas, Kansas, Michigan and Virginia."

A \$60,000 endowment was to be raised to support the salary of a "university standard" professor who would teach Biblical history and literature, evidences and comparative religion. The courses would be open to all students and citizens of Bloomington. The professor would minister to Christian denomination students at IU.

At a meeting of the IU trustees in June of 1911, President William Lowe Bryan took note of the Christian Church and urged trustees to give their approval. In response, the trustees approved "the granting of credit for work of university quality done in departments or schools of

Biblical instruction . . . The question of granting such credit and the amount of same shall in all cases be determined by the authorities of the university."

Dr. Burton D. Myers, author of Volume II of the *History of Indiana University*, wrote that no credit had been authorized by April of 1917, when the issue was brought up officially before the faculty. Continued Myers, "After prolonged discussion the matter was referred to a committee for reconsideration. Partly because of opposition based on uncertainty regarding organization and stability of the chair, and partly because of pressure of many matters relating to the impending war, this committee did not report back to the faculty."

That particular idea was lost in the shuffle, but the intent was not. In time, Bloomington churches appointed additional ministers to work with university students.