

THE EVANGELICAL SEMINARY OF PUERTO RICO

Background

It was not until 1898 that protestant work was begun in Puerto Rico. Before, in 1873 there was an Anglican church, but its religious activities were limited to English speaking people. Spain was in possession of the Island and only catholicism was the official religion of the people. When the United States of America got possession of the Island during the Spanish-American War in 1898 religious liberty was proclaimed. Thirteen American denominations came and started to organize churches all over the new territory. As it is evident, a native ministry did not exist. Some American missionaries who had experience doing protestant work in some countries in Latin America were moved to Puerto Rico. They found out that a national ministry was needed. So, they began to prepare preachers and religious workers among the people of the new field. Very soon Presbyterians, Baptists, Disciples of Christ and Methodist established religious institutes of their own for the training of a native personnel.

A Seminary, interdenominational and ecumenic

On September 11, 1919, after careful study and preparation, five religious groups including, American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Presbyterian, U.S.A., Congregational Christian and Evangelical United Brethren decided to organize an ecumenical theological school. They had in mind the creation of a first-class institution. They had a name for it: El Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico. (The Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico).

At the beginning the founders of the school were moved by missionary ideas. The emphasis was placed on the preaching of the gospel and the conversion of people to Protestant Christianity. They knew that the minister at that time had to face a

strong opposition from catholics. Very soon representatives of the missions were convinced that the needs were an integrated ministerial education, an ecumenic spirit and a well-trained personnel for the Caribbean Area.

Organization

The Seminary, at its beginning was run by a Board of Directors, to be composed of representatives from the national Puerto Rican Churches, and a Board of Trustees representing the Boards from the U.S.A. Years later the Board of Directors was eliminated and the Board of Trustees was the only governing body. It was then composed of representatives of the Boards in the U.S.A. and a member from Puerto Rican churches. With the growth of the school the Board of Trustees was once more modified by the addition of representatives from the educational, business and other groups from the community.

The Seminary had an initial enrollment of 24 students. A lot of land five acres large was bought where residences for the faculty members were built. The students lived off this campus in a building which was located in front of the University of Puerto Rico and which had been used by the Baptists as a theological school. Later the student body was moved to the lot where professors lived.

By 1950 the Seminary had about 30 years of existence. At that time it had clarified its purpose, thus:

The purpose of the Seminary is to provide the cooperative denominations with efficiently trained men who are capable of carrying an effective work in any pastoral charge to which they are assigned and will always maintain the principles of evangelical Christianity. The Basic principle on which this cooperative theological Seminary is organized is the belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour, Lord and Head of the church. Students are taught respect and appreciation for other denominations, and at the same time are inculcated with the attitude of absolute loyalty to their own. (El Boletín, Year XVI - October-December, 1952. No. 2, p. 10).

Entrance Requirements

When the Seminary was in its infancy, the credentials required were as follows:

1. A recommendation from the ecclesiastical body to which he was a member
2. A transcript of his academic record
3. A medical examination
4. At least a High School Diploma

These requirements were later modified especially as to the academic standing of the candidate. As time went on a second year university was required to enter the Seminary and finally a four year college course or its equivalent from an accredited institution. If a student did not belong to one of the cooperating denominations, the President and Dean determined whether or not to accept the candidate.

Program of study and requirements for graduation

There has been four areas of study since the beginning, to wit: Systematic Theology, Biblical Literature, Church History, Religious Education. First 96 credit-hours covering subjects on those area were required for graduation. At present, there has been some change on that. At the beginning, a student with High School or two year college could get a Diploma. When two years college were required for entrance the student should have had introductory course in psychology, philosophy, sociology and education. For the Bachelor of Theology Degree, the candidate should have had a Bachelor of Arts degree or its equivalent, 96 semester hours and present a thesis on a research problem. Then the Degree of Master of Theology was offered on the completion of thirty credits. "B" as average was required for the degree.

The Faculty

Since its beginning, the Seminary looked for a well-qualified professorship. In order to teach, a man was supposed to have at least an S.T.M. degree and be a candidate for the doctorate. The faculty was composed of Americans, but in 1926 a Puerto Rican was chosen as one of the members of the teaching staff. In 1950 the American missions thought that the institution should be in the hands of Puerto Ricans. A Puerto Rican was elected to the presidency together with three professors. Only one American was left in the faculty. From 1950 on the institution has followed that policy, with few exceptions.

The Library

It contains more than 40,000 books and periodicals, completely catalogued. There is a very adequate building with a good reading room and excellent places for students to do research and individual work.

Devotional Life

One of the most attractive buildings in the campus is the chapel. It was built in such a way as to put the worshiper in contact with nature. Four times a week students and faculty members get there together to pray, to hear excellent religious music, to preach and to hear from time to time very good lectures on different subjects. Many a time services are held in the open air.

Support of the Seminary

This institution is a church related one. Its financial support has been mainly provided from the cooperating denominations. National churches from Puerto Rico and some friendly institutions have contributed to financing it. Students pay fees but not all can do that. The budget for 1978-1979 has been estimated in \$351,000 of which mission Boards U.S.A. are supposed to give \$104,000, or 29.6% of the total amount.

Significance of the Seminary and projections

More than twenty one different denominations train their ministers here. Last year 153 students were enrolled. Full time professors including librarians, number twelve. They are not all necessarily members of the cooperative denominations. They are chosen for their training and their excellency as teachers.

The institutions has a five year projection which includes male and female enrollment, full time equivalency, total number of credits and tuition. Necessary educational steps have been taken to face the needs of the churches who in turn has to face a growing society with many difficult problems.

José Aracelio Cardona
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