

How Should We Handle Social Dancing Among Our Students

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This is, of course, not the first time that specific attention has been given to the subject of dancing in Lutheran circles. Back at the close of the 1600's in Hamburg a bitter battle raged between three Pietist preachers, Wickler, Hinkelman, and Horb, and the more orthodox members of the consistory, headed the famed Wittenberg Chrysostom, John Mayer.

When the Pietists wanted to take the offensive in the conflict, they raised charges against the colorful and controversial Mayer, who once even took a *Klingelbeutel* into the pulpit and preached to it in the bitter battle of narthex collection box vs. *Klingelbeutel* at Hamburg. Among such charges was the accusation of the Pietists that Mayer had once in a funeral sermon for a member of the cloth, a certain Vogel, declared his death blessed, although it had taken place on a dance floor onto which the man being eulogized had slumped after momentarily interrupting a lively dance to imbibe a long, cool draft of beer.

Not the beer drinking, but the dancing was the core issue for the Pietists in their battle with Mayer. They had always placed dancing high on their long enemy list.

This is, of course, not the first time that the subject of dancing has engendered discussion on this campus. Some forty years ago a group of this school's students, perhaps for no better reason than to shorten a long winter evening, raised the question, "Why can't we have a junior prom?" with the president of the school—his name will not be mentioned but the assurance is given that it was not the present incumbent of the office.

The president's first reaction was the ploy of the counter query, "Who would want to dance with Northwestern coeds?" The students assured him that importation was a major factor in their planning.

Then the president became more serious. If memory serves correctly, spoke at length about dangers and problems involved, with the chief points falling into a summary statement something like this attempted facsimile, "In Hoskins there, is a little old lady who loves and supports this school. She would be offended to hear that its students are putting on dances." Needless say, there wasn't any Northwestern prom then and there isn't any now.

The two instances are related for more of a reason than the professional quirk, of injecting into every discussion some sort of historical approach and background. The two incidents suggest two basic aspects of the subject that loomed large in the planning of this presentation and helped shape its form.

For one thing, there has been a Pietist strain that has manifested itself time and again in the church's efforts to deal with problems that dancing produced. Often very legitimate concerns and condemnations of evils were undermined by the overreach that resulted from the tendency to regulate the sanctified life of the free Christian.

For another, there may be many special angles and complicated sides to the theme question, many of which lie beyond the limited ken of the essayist. The main issue, however, is the matter of offense, a most important matter we all realize. Once this consideration has been given its due, most all complications and problems will solve themselves and grave consequences will have been avoided. There are grave issues involved in the matter, as is also

indicated by the key word in the first answer to the question: “How Shall We Handle Social Dancing Among Our Students?” That first answer is:

Part One: By Applying the Term *Sin* Where It Applies

Even the fans of dancing in our midst will have to admit there is much truth in the old dictum of the Pietists and others: dancing is sinful because it provokes to unchastity and is itself often unchaste. Where the dancing involves the provocation of lust and unchastity there is sin. Where the dance is in itself unchaste, and there is such dancing, there is sin.

Where sin is invading the lives of students in our charge, there our serious admonitions and our severest condemnations are appropriate and required. Here silence has no place and condonation is no answer. While admittedly there could be difficulties in drawing the line that marks where each instance of social dancing transgresses into the illicit area, there can be no questions about handling the situation once that line is crossed. We are against sin. There is no need to belabor the point.

There should be ready and unanimous agreement on the proposition that all social dancing that is sinful is to be condemned. The same goes for the guideline that such dancing will be shunned by our schools and by our students under all circumstances.

It would be a simple matter for deans and presidents and instructors and essayists if now the blanket statement could be made, as has been done, that all social dancing is sin. The difficulties arise because that just isn't the case.

There are types of social dances in our day, that just don't fit the rubric “provoking to unchastity.” Among them are the non-contact athletic events that look to the observer as though violent motion is involved instead of vile emotion and as though lust is being suppressed rather than expressed.

In other social dancing the touch amounts to the lightest of embraces and the movements are graceful rather than seductive. Again, one is hard put to pin the tag, “provoking to unchastity,” to each and every instance of the same.

One thinks also of forms of folk dancing, such as square dancing or other present day equivalents of the old frontier barn dance, where the element of sociability and rhythm and fun seems to abound and where any provocation to lust would seem very much on the incidental side.

An expert in the art or activity of the social dance could, no doubt, spin out this list *ad infinitum*. The essayist has come to the end of his limited knowledge and even more limited experience. The point has been made, however, that is quite impossible to claim in our day that all social dancing is sinful because it is either unchaste itself or provokes to unchastity.

There is another kind of variable involved, in addition to this difference in the types of dances. It is to be found in the dancers. Not all of them will react to the situation in the same way. What may well be provocation to lust in one instance may not be that at all in another. It seems we have to take the word of fellow Christians who insist that they can dance without being provoked. One could be hard put to characterize that person's dancing as sin.

It is obvious that such a consideration of variables creates problems. The flat statement, “Dancing is sin,” is much easier to operate with than its less definite counterparts, “Dancing is sometimes sin,” or “Some dancing is sin.” Veterans in the work of counseling as pastors or teachers or both will regard that statement as another specific instance of the old truism that the

easiest thing to do when the counseling situation gets sticky or tricky is to set up or lay down the all-embracing rule.

Easy, yes but not always productive. Much of the difficulty in our church body with social dancing has been caused by an indiscriminate charge of sin. You and I have all been disheartened to hear some stranger to our church body say, "You are the Wisconsin Synod that is so strict that it is even against dancing." One is hearing that these days as frequently as one heard one score years ago the put-down, "You are the Wisconsin Synod that is so strict that it is even against scouting."

In the long haul the more discriminatory approach to dancing might actually be the easier course in that it takes us off the horns of several embarrassing dilemmas. We may endeavor to sound the warning against the dangers of dancing with great zeal and find ourselves in an untenable situation. The student being counseled may respond, "You claim dancing is a sin but my parents and my church's organizations engage in dancing and they aren't doing wrong."

Another student, who may very well be in very serious need of some down-to-earth admonitions regarding the evils of dancing will derive some cold and casuistical comfort from his opposition to our too sweeping judgments.

Equally important, there is obviated the danger of developing a double standard when dealing with specifics in the field of sanctification. In one case, what some would call a dubious activity may be sheltered by the flowing cloak of Christian liberty. In the other, the dubious activity could be divested of any and every claim of respectability as it is summarily categorized as transgression.

This material is written with extreme reluctance by one who admires the Synodical Conference fathers almost to a fault. Serious indictments of dancing have been expressed by them in the past. Can less be said now?

There should be a cognizance of the possibility that any apparent variation in the judgment is less a matter of change in theological doctrine and practice and more a matter of change in the opposition and in the times. One ought always to hear this possibility in mind when reading the literature of the fathers on the subject. An obvious case in point is the literature on life insurance, once condemnatory but now accommodating, if not laudatory. The object of consideration has changed and the subject is doing his consideration in a changed perspective.

What Walther and Zorn and Dallmann and P. E. Kretzmann wrote on the subject may well apply to dancing in their time. The writer assumes it does, since they were there and should have known what the score was. What they would write about today's non-contact, athletic-type dancing the essayist hesitates to surmise.

He also has the feeling that changing times have something to say about any differentiation in judgements on the subject. In earlier ages when the mores and the mobility of the young were much more severely restricted by chaperonage and convention than they are now, when the glimpse of the female ankle and a touch of her arm was in the realm of high adventure for the young man, one could readily ascribe to the dance great provocation to lust.

One doubts, however, whether the same holds true in the case of a generation geared to huddling and cuddling on car seats and much more public places. The trend to easy-going informality in the boy-girl routine, to casual garb, to close school association has, it must be assumed, taken some of the edge off the contact on the dance floor and brought the allure of the mystery there down to the level of the commonplace.

Even if the essayist were proved wrong in that assumption, the whole trend of thought suggests that to come down hard on just one kind of close contact when so many others are

condoned invites the charge of inconsistency and unclarity. Nothing is more disconcerting and disturbing to the young than that. They will, however, respond more positively when earnest efforts are made in a consideration of dancing to apply the term *sin* to all that, but only that which is sin.

Then they will also be receptive when we endeavor to attend to another important issue in our handling of social dancing among our students. As a second answer to how we are to do that, the essay provides:

Part Two: By Guarding Against the Giving of Offense

As has been stated, this is the key issue. It should be noted too at the outset that the term is used in the formal sense of causing those whose knowledge about what is free and not free in the matter either to act contrary to their conscience or to be weakened in their faith. Nothing could be farther from what a Christian wants than that deplorable outcome for the brother in faith. Not to be equated with this most serious aspect of the term *offense* are secondary meanings that have to do with mere differences regarding human manners or viewpoints or whimsies.

That a real possibility exists of giving real offense in the matter of dancing is not to be doubted or disputed. Given the role dancing has played in the history of the church, it would seem strange if there were not some confusion about what is sin and what is permitted.

A student in our school could give offense by dancing in his home community, far from the campus of our school. The matter could be drawn to the attention of the school and instruction on the danger of giving offense might be called for.

More likely would be an offense problem arising from an off-campus dance in which our students are major participants, perhaps even promoters. The school may not be directly involved, but the school's students are. Offenses in such incidents will have to be given special and prompt attention because of the close, though indirect, association of the school with the source of the offense.

If our schools were to sponsor student dancing, especially if that were on campus in school facilities, the possibility of offense would be greatest of all. Some would, of course, charitably conclude that synod schools could do no wrong and would take all necessary precautions to see that all was being done well. Others, however, would find their inhibitions about dancing doubled if the dancing took place at a synod school.

The preceding paragraphs necessarily abound in subjunctives and conditionals. The "iffy" tone is unavoidable for the difficulty with offenses is their unpredictability before-the-fact. In many cases they arise in situations where they are least expected. Sometimes, however, knowledge of past circumstances and previous experiences make educated guessing possible. This seems to be the case with dancing. The record suggests trouble ahead if we play the role of advocate and promoter.

Those who hope for some sort of school-sponsored social dancing had better therefore move cautiously and, if at all possible, test the situation in advance. The first venture had better be a relatively innocuous form, such as a square dance, and some sort of reaction in the parishes ought also to be ascertained before taking the step. Actually, just such an experiment was attempted some dozen years ago.

At that time square dancing was the thing to do in the area of our most eastern district at that time and it was a not uncommon feature of our congregations' youth group activities there. The fad, I understand, is popular now in the Milwaukee area and will no doubt be big in South

Dakota in 1996. In any event, Michigan Lutheran Seminary students brought to their campus a yen for activities they were enjoying in the home parish.

Before making any decision and taking any action, the school asked for advice from the pastors on a district-wide basis. The result was a resolution encouraging the school to include in student party activities what was euphemistically called “musical games” but which was understood by all to be square dancing.

The experiment which might have cleared away some confusion and have provided a clue to the offense problem died aborning. The details escape the essayist. The president of the school involved at that time—again no names are mentioned but the present president is exonerated—did not report extensively on this his least-very likely not last-productive venture in radicalism in our sphere of interest. Perhaps a school in a more typical area hesitated to say, “a.” Whatever the reason, nothing happened.

The advisable course at this time may be some sort of venture beyond the present type of stalemate with prevailing practice seeming to say that not all dancing is in itself sinful but that no offense should be given and some still determined to condemn all dancing. This lengthy section on not giving offense should not close without some reference to the Bible’s own recommended outcome. This outcome is that there be edification, that the weak, being presently tolerated, be instructed and guided into a full realization and appreciation of Christian liberty.

Our church body claims to take Scripture seriously and at face value. It is, however, very slow in the endeavor to transform those weak and susceptible to offense into those who will judge correctly. Perhaps this is because ours is a conservative church body and those offended are usually concerned about a more conservative course of action. Whatever the case, the point is that being concerned about offenses should imply a concern about edification also.

An entirely different approach to the question: “How Should We Handle Social Dancing Among Our Students?” is involved in the answer in:

Part Three: By Viewing the Matter in the Light of the Total Educational Endeavor

The moral do’s and don’ts that have been previously aired are the most important factor in the question, but by no means the whole of it. Obviously if the decision here is that it is morally wrong for students at our schools to dance, the question has been basically settled. However, even if all were agreed that there is no moral problem involved directly or indirectly, there would still be other issues that would help determine how willingly we would condone or how enthusiastically we would promote social dancing among our students either away from school or on campus.

It may be an old-fashioned view but some of us will insist that student desire should not by itself determine what is done or left undone. Student participation in planning school activities, especially those that are directly related to their own social life, is all well and good. There are, however, bounds and limits.

For a decade there has been an effort on large university campuses to develop an educational system where student opinion and desire is the ultimate factor in determining policy regarding courses and grades and budgets and activities. Results have not been good and already the reversal of the trend is making itself felt. What students want, even what they want unanimously, does not necessarily make for good educational policy. Student wishes do not have to be deliberately flouted, neither should they automatically become our commands.

In fact, it could be proposed, with some show of right, that some abnegation of wants of this kind is conducive to the over-all discipline aspect of education, at least our education that prepares for the public ministry.

Those in the public ministry soon find that their private life, their life-style just isn't their own business. There are quirks in the mores of almost every American community, small and big, that can be ignored only at the risk of considerable negative repercussion.

It may not be amiss to stress this point and teach this lesson long before work in the public ministry is begun. Some will hope that there are always some do's and some don'ts on our campuses that set our schools off from others in the community. School dancing has always been one of them. Whether it should continue to be so, is not now necessarily the point. The point is that there is value in having some differentiating omissions and commissions also in the social life at our schools. The results of popularity polls and the urge for conformity should not be deemed the omnipotent lever or leveler.

Even our synod schools, that share certain least common denominators in their basic educational platforms and policies, programs and products may have distinctive characteristics that need to be taken into account if the total educational view is to be brought to bear on the question of the proper handling of our students. Level and location, population and purpose are obvious variables that would be strong evaluative factors.

To make the point by specific instance, one could refer to Dr. Martin Luther College. Even if Saginaw or Watertown were to inaugurate social dancing programs, one would scarcely expect New Ulm to do the same on the college level. The predominant female population of the school would seem to rule out social dancing as a school activity unless one would be willing to sacrifice the happiness and harmony of the student body. Few of us opt for any activity at such a price.

Such an expression of opinion, however, strays from the broad matter of differences between our school and verges prematurely on decision making in the specific. This is the concern of the fourth and final answer to how we are to handle social dancing among our students.

Part Four: By Practicing Effective Policy Determination and Implementation

How much good can a gathering of this sort accomplish in answering the question in the theme? Even closer to home, how much can an essayist contribute who hasn't danced since he last flatfooted his way through a number called "Big Apple" and, in addition has transferred himself some years ago, from campuses where students worry about dancing to more quiet and more scholarly groves of academe.

The answer to both questions is, "Not all that much." An essayist and conference might well deal aptly with broad issues and general truths. They are not in the best position, however, of deciding what should be done about this or that dancing party or what specific counseling is in place in a given instance. The questions are complicated, the ramifications are legion.

The persons who do the decision making should be, as much as possible, persons close to the scene and in the know. The decision about social dancing among Mobridge students should be made, subject of course to broad guidelines, at Mobridge and not at Saginaw or Watertown or New Ulm or any combination of them.

The Mobridge faculty should deal with larger issues and the Mobridge dean and president should apply these to the specific situation. That will be the best way to handle social dancing among Mobridge students.

This does not mean that we will have some six schools with conflicting policies and as many variations in addition as there are area high schools. On the broad aspects of what is to be condemned as sinful and how the giving of offense is to be regarded there should be agreement, total agreement. Then some variation in details will not be a disturbing factor but will rather be helpful in that each school provides what is best in its situation.

Positive results will be effected also if we give the respective presidents and deans a relatively free hand in implementing larger decisions that have been made and carrying out a practice that has been agreed upon. These two are the key figures when it comes to handling social dancing among students. They have to give delicate personal advice in such a serious matter as offense. Back-door opposition, second guessing, passing too many rules are not the most helpful activities on the part of their faculty brethren.

It is with this very point in mind that this paper has been very sparing in offering definite and concrete answers to the questions, "How Should We Handle Social Dancing Among Our Students?" Others are much more able to supply the right answer in the concrete.

Novel and startling suggestions for changing our ways and means in the matter are also lacking because the essayist is confident that all concerned—faculty, presidents, deans, and student also in many cases—are presently pursuing safe and sound pathways through a complicated maze-like area of concern.

The most startling suggestion possible, that our school inaugurate programs of social dancing for their students, has not been offered. The essayist hesitates to be the one to go down in synod history as the first advocate of dances at synod schools in a public conference and in a formal paper. He would like to call that applying the Eighth Commandment to his own reputation. You will probably call it chicken.

The paper and the essayist are not, however, at all reticent about re-emphasizing in conclusion the previous call for a more judicious approach to social dancing among our students than that voiced in the old dictum, "Dancing is sin." Along with that goes the plea that as serious a consideration be given of the offense question as Paul requested of the Corinthians. If that be done, all will be done well.

Outline and Discussion Questions

Part I. By Applying the Term Sin Where It Applies

1. What do we hold about the old statement, "Dancing is sin"?
2. What aspects of social dancing are sinful or provoke to sin?
3. What types of social dancing can be considered unobjectionable?
4. How much should a changed life-style affect our attitude to dancing?

Part II. By Guarding Against the Giving of Offense

5. How can the sense of responsibility in the matter of giving offense be sharpened in our students?
6. How much responsibility is ours for off-campus dancing by our students?
7. How much disturbance would a school-sponsored dance cause in the church body?
8. How much of such disturbance is tolerable?

Part III. By Viewing the Matter in the Light of the Total Educational Endeavor

9. What benefits would school-sponsored dances contribute to the educational endeavor?
10. How many of our students dance and how many want school-sponsored dancing?
11. How much weight should be given to student opinion?
12. Should dancing be regarded as a "don't" for those in the public ministry or preparing for it?

Part IV. By Practicing Effective Policy Development and Implementation

13. How much can this body contribute to decision making about social dancing?
14. How can faculties and faculty members aid deans and presidents in this whole area?
15. What is the wisest course of action at the present time?
16. How much of the paper should be rejected or accepted?