**MicSem: A Bit of Background**

***The Origins***

Back in 1971, during the first church planning council ever held in Micronesia, we were just beginning to retool church programs to respond to the challenges of Vatican II. How were we going to assist church personnel in the renewal they need if they were ever to realize the mission of the church, as described in the Council? Even beyond this, how were we to help our people integrate faith and life, especially amid the new set of social and political problems they faced as the islands began to modernize rapidly? Micronesian Seminar was the mission-wide program created to address these needs.

*Renewal*. Through the rest of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, MicSem organized the two-week renewal workshops held every other summer to update religious and laity on theological and social issues. When these were discontinued, MicSem played a major role in organizing and running diocesan workshops every few years (the most recent was in 2003). But MicSem did not do so alone; it worked very closely with Jesuit superiors and the bishops in planning and carrying out these events.

*Faith and Life*. If the church was to help integrate faith and life, we needed a much better understanding of the issues our people were facing. We asked ourselves why we shouldn’t put some effort into the education of the entire Micronesian community when we had invested so heavily in the education of the young. Thus was born what later became the main thrust of MicSem today: the attempt to help understand what is going on around them, so that they are better prepared to deal with the problems that arise. MicSem has sometimes been called a “think tank” or a research institute, but the truth is that any research MicSem has done has been directed at public education*.* That has been always been the final goal of its entire program.

MicSem’s program underwent considerable adaptation over the years. During the 1970s we ran week-long conferences that drew participants from all over the region. By the mid-1980s we were doing reflection weekends in the different island groups. In the 1990s, after our move to Pohnpei, we ran monthly conferences for local residents. Likewise, in an effort to reach a wider audience directly, we began publishing our *Micronesian Counselor* (which once had a mailing list of about 800), producing video programs for the TV stations that were opening everywhere, and finally creating a website that offered people everywhere nearly all of our products and has become increasingly popular in the ten years it has been on-line.

***Behind the Changes***

Even as MicSem’s programs were changing in form over the years, there have been some long-term patterns that we should note. In the first place, the responsibility for updating clergy and religious has diminished almost to the vanishing point. The summer workshops have long since ceased, partly because other renewal opportunities became available to religious groups and diocesan priests.

Secondly, MicSem’s community education program has involved the church leadership less and less as the years have gone by. Those conferences in the 70's were attended by a number of priests and sisters; the reflection weekends of the 80's were done at the request of the local church and participants were invited by the church. Afterwards, by contrast, church participation was incidental to the nature of most MicSem programs. MicSem spoke directly to the people themselves through TV programs and publications and website.

The result of all this has been a distancing of MicSem from the church and the Society. This is not to say that its work was unappreciated, but that it was seen as being done entirely under the aegis of MicSem. It was not regarded as a cooperative effort even in the way St. Ignatius House of Studies was when pastors were sending a few young men each year as candidates for the priesthood. (Xavier High School, by the way, has undergone a similar distancing from the rest of the region for much the same reason.) I think it’s fair to say that most Jesuits can admire what MicSem has done, but walk away satisfied that this is someone else’s work and impinges on them and their own ministry only slightly, if at all.

***MicSem: 2000-2010***

It’s tempting to define MicSem by the products it has created, since they are many. It put out an average of five issues of *Micronesian Counselor* yearly (82 issues in all), along with four or five videos for broadcast over local TV stations (a total of 73 videos). It offered three new photo albums on-line each year (30 altogether). The video productions include a seven-hour series “The History of Micronesia,” as well as three hours of mini-videos adapted from its online historical photo albums. MicSem also created a website that serves as an additional outlet for its products.

Even more important than the products themselves is the *flow of ideas* that have been generated through articles, videos and other channels. At one time or other MicSem has weighed in on just about every issue facing the islands: suicide, domestic violence, family change, the transformation of traditional authority, economic development, and governance, to name a few. As MicSem has tried to offer its insights and syntheses to people here, it became a key dialogue partner–with local people, with migrants to the US and its territories, and with institutions such as Asian Development Bank and US agencies that assist in development.

In the process of doing this, MicSem has become a one-of-a-kind *resource center*. The resources gathered are books and photos and music from the past, from which people can construct a more solid understanding of who they are and where they came from. The resources include: 27,000 library titles and a large collection of newsletters and bulletins related to the region; 80,000 photos, many of them of historical interest; 700 videos and films, all in digital formats; and 25,000 musical tracks of island chants, songs and hymns. MicSem offers access to these resources through the website as well as through direct visits to the office.

***The Institution***

Initially, MicSem was sponsored and supported by the Vicariate of the Caroline-Marshall Islands, but it was turned over to the Society of Jesus about 1990 or so. During its earliest years MicSem was located at Xavier High School and run by the Jesuit who was then also Director of Xavier. In 1982, the office was moved to Tunnuk and MicSem operated out of what was then the Jesuit house for the next ten years. In 1992, when the director was named Regional Superior, the library and operation was transferred to Pohnpei, where a new building was put up for MicSem by the New York Province. There it expanded operations and staff until 2010.

Micronesian Seminar is registered as a non-profit corporation in the FSM and is governed by a Board of Directors that was to meet yearly. The MicSem staff, which numbered nine at its shut-down, included a librarian, a full-time photo archivist, a trained videographer and his intern. MicSem’s total annual operating budget was about $140,000, with $12,000 a year coming in the form of a subsidy from the Jesuits of Micronesia. The rest of the budget was covered by gifts, grants and fees for services.