

**THE LEADING EDGE**

*Earl Creps' leadership newsletter*  
*Director of the AGTS D.Min. Program in Pentecostal Leadership*  
**April 2003**

Dear Friends:

My Leading Edge newsletter for this month will be different.

A few days ago our 2003 D.Min. graduating class had the opportunity to present the results of their project research. Thirteen speakers each briefly reported on the outcome of the professional project that is required for the Doctor of Ministry. The projects were practical, impressive, and groundbreaking in several cases.

You can review abstracts of the projects, and find email links to contact the authors at:

[http://www.agts.edu/dmin/abstracts/dmin\\_projects.html](http://www.agts.edu/dmin/abstracts/dmin_projects.html)

Below find the Reflective Response I delivered at the end of the project presentations. Many friends have asked me for a copy of this talk, so I am circulating it in newsletter form. I hope it is life-giving for you and your ministry.

Blessings,

Earl

Earl G. Creps, Ph.D., D.Min.  
<http://www.agts.edu/faculty/creps.html>

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program in Pentecostal Leadership  
Leaders Worth Following/Disciples Worth Emulating  
<http://www.agts.edu/dmin/index.html>

Assemblies of God Theological Seminary  
1435 N. Glenstone Ave.  
Springfield, MO 65802  
1-800-467-AGTS  
[www.agts.edu](http://www.agts.edu)

AGTS Doctor of Ministry Project Symposium Response  
May 2, 2003  
Earl Creps

Very few things in life prepare a person for speaking fourteenth. One of the things that I hope has prepared me was receiving a Certificate of Completion in 1985 from the Berean Institute of the Bible, of Springfield, Missouri. I am a correspondence school product.

At the time, however, that piece of paper seemed like a point of no return, marking the end of my "secular" education, and the culmination of ministry training. Earlier work in the field of communication would now be slaved to ministry tasks like preaching, and years of study in the university setting would be scrapped.

But I remained closet academic, secretly reading books at night when no one was watching. Ministry peers subtly encouraged me to divorce the world of ideas, worrying that "knowledge puffs up." The high water mark of this influence was the day I put 8 years worth of text books and lecture notes into a garbage can and walked away.

Even with this act of repentance, however, I remained enslaved to my addiction, reading about the Civil War, or relativity theory, or the history of opera, or brain anatomy; devouring television documentaries on everything from the Panama Canal to the Loch Ness monster. But none of it ever really fit the ministry as I knew it, except as the occasional, far-fetched sermon illustration.

They say the first step to recovery is to admit that you are powerless over your problem. I was. And I was also living in two worlds; one fed my Church, while the other fed my soul. Balancing the academic and the practical by reading a leadership book one week and life of Magellan the next only reinforced the divide, the Berlin Wall between mind and ministry.

The wall finally crumbled in my AGTS Doctor of Ministry experience. It changed me so much that I took this job. The change was not more information, or more competence, although those things happened; the change was a new identity.

I am a practical theologian. On a day like this, let's take stock of what our newly-minted practical theologians have produced in their professional projects. How about...

- A new model for training Presbyters to coach pastors
- An Hispanic church planting project that became five times larger than expected

- First-ever lectures on the history of the Assemblies of God in Burkina Faso
- Two projects helping pastors to develop small group ministries
- A highly adaptable model for training deacons in frontline ministry
- Two projects that deployed powerful spiritual formation tools.
- A training seminar that will protect ministers from moral failure
- A method for closing the "backdoor" of rapidly growing churches
- A church plant case study that will equip future planters
- An Internet resource making theological materials available for the Spanish-speaking world in one place for the first time. This is also our first bi-lingual project.
- A marriage and family text that will touch a million people in a dozen languages

This is what our practical theologians have accomplished in just one year by bringing down the wall between mind and ministry.

Practical theology, then, is not the opposite of impractical theology. An idea that has no real-world implications is not theology at all; it is only philosophy about God. Conversely, any program lacking strong theological roots will at best shrivel and die, and at worst become misguided and carnal. The truth is that both of the extremes, academic and pragmatic, can be emulated by anyone who has the interest and the intelligence.

Only a synthesis of reflection and action requires a living faith in Jesus Christ who is Himself the Word made flesh. The starting point of practical theology is not some arcane balancing of ideas and pragmatics, but the Person of Christ Himself, in whom all things cohere. In the Seminary community, we call this many things: Del Tarr called it "knowledge on fire," Byron Klaus speaks of "theological thoroughness," and Joe Castleberry predicts the rise of "organic intellectuals." But while easy to identify, actually setting knowledge on fire is so difficult, so daunting, so impossible, that a radical dependence on the person of Christ and the power of his Spirit is the only way to produce it. Otherwise, it simply cannot be done—ever. I believe this is why it is attempted so seldom.

The practice of practical theology, then, is neither disembodied theory nor suburban church models, but a discerning sensitivity to the Person and activity of Christ and to the many ways He reveals Himself in both Word and World. Practical theologians

understand that they must give their lives to this pursuit or perish, retreating into some sly parody of what servant-leadership genuinely entails.

The days of easy answers, template-driven formats, and willing audiences are behind us. The servant of God whose heart lives to see knowledge burn will be the only kind of missionary that can announce the coming of God's Kingdom to our post-Christian culture.

Hyper-pragmatists will crash and burn in a frenzy of self-promotion, or slowly die of spotlight radiation. Hyper-intellectuals will drift away into the cold orbits of pointless speculation, spending whole careers living on what someone has called, "the cutting edge of irrelevance." Cautious, diplomatic, politically savvy "balancers" will risk selling their spiritual birthright for chicken and peas.

The alternative is practical theologians who will live sacrificially with the chronic pain of merging reflection and application. This person will be broken enough, perplexed enough, desperate enough to seek the face of God for fresh insight, fresh initiatives, and a fresh anointing. The enemy of mission, then, is not the person who asks questions. The enemy of mission is the person who has it all figured out.

This is a half-time moment, a time to celebrate mid-life. In fact, many people enter the D.Min. program to tool-up for the last laps of their career. I did. And I believe we serve those individuals well. But I challenge you today: be a practical theologian. Live and serve in that terrible, wonderful, frightening, complicated, embarrassing, trying, miraculous in-between place where the answers are hard and the path is not always clear; but where we will find the only source of real transformation. This is the place where God's glory melts our walls like wax.

The future of Christianity in the United States is on the line in the next 5-10 years. At this Seminary, a small but intrepid band is forming. Our goal is simple: to help reignite the mission of Jesus in the Church, to catalyze the transition from programs and events to passion and go-for-broke servanthood.

If we fall short, let it be said of us that we failed because we dreamed too big, tried too hard, believed too greatly, compromised too little, prayed too long, and sacrificed too much. Let it be said of us that we were fools for Christ,

foolish enough, in fact, to have trusted God for the impossible.  
We are interested in nothing less.

I will now lead our graduates in the first-ever administration  
of the AGTS Practical Theologians Oath. Would all of our Doctor  
of Ministry graduates please stand, and repeat these words after  
me:

- I will be who I am
- I will go where I am sent
- I will be discerning and reflective
- I will trust God for the impossible
- And, I will do it now

Thank you.

Sent by: Deborah Fegler  
Department Secretary  
Doctor of Ministry Office  
Assemblies of God Theological Seminary  
1435 North Glenstone Avenue  
Springfield, MO 65802  
[www.agts.edu](http://www.agts.edu)  
1-800-467-AGTS