

AGTS Ph.D. Graduation Response:

“The Interface of Theological Reflection and Missional Practice for Enhanced Pentecostal Ministry”

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~ Dr. Easter is AGTS' first Ph.D. graduate ~

Opening Remarks

From the late nineteenth century onward, the rapid, worldwide expansion of the Pentecostal Movement has served to reignite the imagination of the global Church, resulting in renewed interest in the role of the Holy Spirit and missions. From their inception, Pentecostals have distinguished themselves as people of mission. For many Pentecostals, the missionary task was concomitant with the movement's reason for being, contributing to the unprecedented growth of Pentecostal churches throughout the world. Their collective consciousness as God's missionary people set Pentecostalism's course for seeking out people in every stratum of society among widely diverse cultures.

Assemblies of God history bears this out. From the beginning, a missional ethos defined our movement as a result of the Spirit's promptings to move out into the world. A clear vision statement, framed by our founders in 1914, epitomizes the purpose of the Assemblies of God: “We commit ourselves to the greatest evangelism the world has ever seen!” Nearly one hundred years later, we have the privilege of

reflecting on how the Lord has used our movement in advancing God's mission in the world.

However, in so doing, I am reminded of Gary McGee's warning that Pentecostals must be careful not to glory in church growth numbers to the detriment of giving attention to challenges and opportunities that face the Church in the new millennium. For this reason, I believe that the initiative of AGTS to offer terminal degrees in Intercultural Studies marks a new milestone in our history. Certainly, the offering of terminal degrees at any academic institution represents a watershed moment—and so it does for this Seminary. The blueprint for vision behind such an initiative lies deeper than academic prestige in order to receive a certificate, construct a resumé for the academy, or offer a competitive program to elicit new student enrollment.

Rather, the value of terminal degrees in Intercultural Studies is that it will aid the advancement of Christ's Kingdom and the AG Fellowship by enhancing our skills to better appraise the contextual realities we face as we preach the gospel, plant the Church, and make disciples of all peoples.

Moreover, since the vision statement of our founders, the rising complexity of earthly societies provokes us to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to use every tool and resource at our disposal to equip the Church for relevant ministry in the twenty-first century.

Our world is experiencing change in ever-accelerated speeds. Pastors in our own North American context and missionaries laboring abroad are under increased pressure as they attempt to navigate through shifting cultural currents that shape the lives of the people to whom they minister—not to mention their own families. Every local community, no matter the shape, size, or location, is affected by this reality. The truth is that context matters!

Some scholars charge that, historically, Pentecostals have not contributed to theological reflection on contextual mission to a degree that would help explain their movement's global expansion in light of contextual factors. If this observation is axiomatic, it reflects the belief that Pentecostals have been more “doers of” than “thinkers about” mission.

Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness within Assemblies of God ranks of the growing need for serious theological reflection that assesses the implications of our historic mission practices in order to inform new missional engagement in light of a dialogue between Scripture, context, and mission.

First, a recasting of a theology of mission is required. Woodberry contends, “Christian mission is now in the midst of a paradigm shift toward a fundamental reorientation to an understanding that the mission of each church begins with its own culture and extends to the world.”¹ Maybe one reason we struggle at contextualization abroad is

because we experience difficulty contextualizing the gospel in our own context. For the Church in the United States to start over in reaching its own Jerusalem, it must begin a restorative process to make us truly missional. Furthermore, how God's people, as a whole, think about God's mission will shape whether our mission practice is relevant within our ministry setting.

Second, the Church must experience a new commitment to cultural engagement. A meaningful theology of mission flows out of intentional missionary engagement with one's cultural surroundings. As believers recognize that much of human experience, including their own perceptions, is mediated culturally, the Church will be able to harness tools that increase its understanding of the people it seeks to win and in so doing, ensure that the gospel is presented in meaningful ways.

Third, the Church needs to reject inward-looking theological constructs in order to adopt a more outward moving theology that embraces the cross and reaches the least reached of our world. The soft places are already taken. Our eyes must look to those people groups who have little, if any access, to the good news of the Kingdom of God through the means of a vibrant local community of faith. The Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist worlds await a new wave of gospel workers from our movement.

Concluding Thoughts

As theory and practice interface, believers must recognize that while theological education needs missional practice, missional practice also needs theological education. As we train a new generation of leaders within our Fellowship, our faith must ultimately rest in the efficacy of the Spirit's work in every locality as individuals

and communities turn to Christ in saving faith. Our prophetic acuity will be honed only to the degree with which we depend on the Spirit's promptings to engage the lives of the people for whom Christ died and the Church seeks to touch them with arms of compassion.

Finally, the commissioning words of Christ from John 20:21-22 provide the stimulus for a mission directed by Scripture, informed by context, which results in mission: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. Then, He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

¹J. Dudley Woodberry, Charles Van Engen, and Edgar J. Elliston, eds., *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century: The Book, the Circle, and the Sandals: Essays in Honor of Paul E. Pierson*. American Society of Missiology Series, No. 23. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 24.