

# The Integration of Seminary Curriculum and Missions Vision

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Seminary training is relatively new to the Assemblies of God and is somewhat discontinuous with its history of theological education rooted in the Bible institute movement of the late 19th century. The strength of the Bible institute model was its contextualized participatory focus, integrating the learning of ministry skills with immediate practice of those ministry skills. Local church leaders (where the Bible institutes were usually housed) served as instructors and spiritual mentors creating a greater likelihood of spiritual formation in the ministers in training. Early Assemblies of God missionaries were products of these Bible institutes and championed the usage of this model in their cross-cultural efforts worldwide. The usage of the Bible institute model was not merely a case of uncritical cloning, rather it provided a speedy way to develop workers most of whom were already involved in ministry. Sessions were held on an intensive short-term basis and students were, in many cases, required to plant churches before progressing to further training sessions.

The Bible institute model provided early Assemblies of God theological educators with a model that fit their eschatological urgency. Belief that the "time was short--the laborers few" focused the attention of training efforts on developing workers with basic ministry skills quickly whose participation in ministry was part of the basic training.

As years have progressed several realities have turned to unique challenges globally. The Assemblies of God constituency is a clear example of the redemptive-lift phenomenon and thus a professionalization of clergy has begun to emerge coupled with rising expectation of "higher" levels of theological education. Graduate degrees are emerging at a number of Assemblies of God schools worldwide. The Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (AGTS) in Springfield, MO is now offering a doctoral degree. These inevitable developments of a revival movement coming of age do require a critique of the structures and content with which contemporary theological education is delivered. If the commitment to global missions is to remain a core value of the Assemblies of God into the 21st century, it is obvious that the contexts for theological education presently employed must re-create the "zeitgeist" which has historically fueled Assemblies of God missionary zeal.

The Assemblies of God Theological Seminary is an institution that has emerged in this later part of the 20th century. Discontinuity with previous models of theological education employed in the Assemblies of God and rising expectations toward higher levels of academic training are clear challenges to the seminary. Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (AGTS) was founded in 1972 in Springfield, Missouri. A close link between the seminary and the Division of Foreign Missions (DFM) of the Assemblies of God (USA) has existed from the seminary's inception. A prime objective for the founding of the seminary was to offer advanced training for missionaries including a special program of preparation previous to departure for the field assignment. The DFM had a significant role in initiating the seminary's development and thus missionary formation has been central to the mission of AGTS.

The mission and purpose statement of AGTS is quite specific in its commitment to the formation of missionaries. Three specific statements exemplify that commitment: (a) to provide training in the professional skills necessary for the practice of ministry in a changing world, focusing on the preparation of pastors, missionaries, evangelists and others; (b) to foster an evangelistic and

missionary emphasis with a global and multi-cultural perspective in order to equip men and women to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ at home and abroad; and (c) to utilize technology and distance-education methodologies in the extension of its educational mission to Christian leaders unable to attend a resident campus (AGTS Self-Study report, 1995).

Since the opening of AGTS, more than 800 Assemblies of God missionaries serving 128 countries have studied at AGTS demonstrating the close linkage between the seminary and the global missionary efforts of the Assemblies of God. fifteen percent of all AGTS graduates serve outside the borders of the USA.

The Jonathan Lewis model of missionary preparation is one that is increasingly a necessity for all missionary personnel. Globalization has created a changing world that defies serious attempts at standardization. Missionaries must simultaneously be biblical scholars, cultural sages, deft linguists and strategic missiologists. Appropriate opportunities for formal training to keep current are necessary for both pre-field candidate and the field missionaries. Over 75% of Assemblies of God missionary candidates have had some international field experience and a high percentage of those candidates with field experience previous to candidacy have more than a "tourist missionary" short term experience. The informal mentoring dimension of missionary formation emphasizes the fact that missionary training is as much about spirituality and character as it is conceptual information.

While AGTS has concerns to serve both the veteran missionary's continuing education needs and the pre-field missionary's formation needs, I will use a practical example of the Global Missions Track (GMT) in the seminary's curriculum to offer a case study in the seminary's commitment to prepare cross-cultural ministers, as we enter a new millennium.

The GMT of AGTS parallels the Jonathan Lewis model very closely in its desire to combine appropriate learning experiences with the most effective context/structure. The purpose of the GMT, as stated, is "to provide the student with an opportunity to live, learn and develop skills in a cross-cultural context. The experience is designed to guide the student in taking a practical step toward developing a faculty for cultural fluency which is necessary for effective ministry in today's world" (AGTS catalog 1998-2000).

Realizing that experience is valuable but not self-interpreting, the GMT facilitates theological reflection using cross-cultural practicums through the use of both faculty and field mentors. The vast network of Assemblies of God missionaries worldwide and within US borders in a variety of urban and rural cross-cultural ministries provides crucial and meaningful supervision. The mentor-learner relationship is not only a short-term benefit to the student but a long-term benefit to the Assemblies of God because the students' cross-cultural awareness is shaped in the context of Assemblies of God cross-cultural efforts. This experience strengthens natural linkages between the student and the long-term service of veteran Assemblies of God missionaries who regularly teach at the seminary. They also serve as field mentors, taking students to parts of the world where they have spent their missionary careers.

The GMT is fully integratable with a variety of degree programs at the seminary at both the MA and M.Div. levels thus serving a variety of students with the cross-cultural sensitivity and experiences that clarify issues of spiritual formation and direction in this student's development. Three month long cross-cultural practicums provide both non-formal and informal components (to use Lewis' terms) for the development of cross-cultural ministers. In addition an evolving group of graduate-level institutions within the Assemblies of God worldwide actually allow for (with AGTS permission) study at international venues for course transfer back to AGTS in the

USA. This formal study, in an international setting, further develops the students' awareness of issues of biblical interpretation, ethics and theological reflection so heavily influenced by culture. The practicums and studies at approved international venues serve to meet the stated objectives of the GMT (AGTS catalog 1998-2000).

**Objectives of the Global Missions Track** -- The GMT is intended to accomplish a variety of short-term and long-term objectives. Although it is expected that inter-cultural ministries in the field will benefit by the contribution of the GMT student, the program's primary emphasis is on the student's development.

**The GMT experience is designed to enable the student to:**

- **Examine** life choices and ministry options in the light of world need and the Great Commission.
- **Learn** by applying missiological theory to the "real" world setting in which ministry is carried out.
- **Grow** by experiencing the practical dynamics of life and ministry in a multi-cultural context.
- **Develop** practical skills in cross-cultural adjustment and communication.
- **Expand** his or her global awareness.
- **Establish** a life-long relationship with the missions enterprise in general and a mission field and a group of missionaries in particular.

The GMT is only one dimension of AGTS, commitment to undergirding the historical global mission ethos of the Assemblies of God. This effort does reflect willingness to clearly address dimensions of seminary education that contribute to detachment from the context of ministry, and thus potentially diminish core values of the seminary and its supporting denomination.