

# Some Reflections on Building Bridges

*Donald Owens, APNTS Founding President*

*Note: Donald Owens did not actually give an inaugural address. This article contains his reflections as the seminary celebrates its twentieth anniversary.*

Building bridges is not always easy, but to get "from here to there" it must be done. It was our joy to be among the first to lay the first spandrels that was to become the Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. What follows are simply some musings of only one of those chosen to be a part of the mediating ministry of the institution.

It is a given that the world has become a global community where peoples of every differing cultures are forced to live together, share the same natural and human resources, and solve the same basic human problems. In the process of becoming community, bridges must be created between culturally pluralistic communities where tensions are often quite pronounced.

By design the Church of the Nazarene has set a course to be a global community of faith. In that process, contextualized theological and praxis pursuits are considered servants of the church in the critical task of the education and formation of persons for the church's ministry. Contextualized theology is not construed to be an epistemological break of continuity with our theological and ecclesial ancestry. The dangers of allowing context to determine the nature and content of theology are always present in the ministry of cross-cultural communication. It was our understanding that there should be a large place in the curriculum for addressing issues of cultural diversity in the field of Pastoral Theology.

As a side note, it was felt by denominational leaders that a theological school in the region would lessen the loss of bright young men and women from the region; also students who elected to remain in the United States following graduation.

The Philippines was chosen to be the site of the Asia-Pacific Theological Seminary for some very practical reasons. Since the institution was to serve two distinct regions, the location seemed quite fitting. Transportation into the country was excellent and student visas were readily

attainable. English was generally spoken throughout the country, making it easier for foreign students to move about the country. Technology and excellent communications were readily available. In addition the real cost of living was less in the Philippines than any other country in Asia. However, other very important contributions were the facts that the country seemed ripe for rapid church growth, there were several organized districts, and there were church planting opportunities everywhere. Students and faculty could find ministry and "hands on" experience in a responsive environment.

The seminary was to be the church at work in the task of theological education. It was for that reason that Metro Manila was chosen to be the site for APNTS. Manila is a "hinge" city. It bypasses traditional national boundaries and has become an international power center with millions of people who seem to be responsive to evangelicals. There were few Nazarene congregations in Manila. The rural areas seem to have been more inviting for a Nazarene presence.

The General Superintendents voted for a merger of the Luzon Nazarene Bible College and the budding APNTS if deemed feasible. The Board of Trustees of that college in Baguio City voted to sell and move its ministry into a joint ministry with the seminary if it was thought best. On the other hand, the Children's Garden property that had been purchased in 1979 could move to Baguio City. In the end, the call of a burgeoning metropolis like Manila was too strong to move five hours higher into the mountains. The merger never took place. The seminary became an active partner with the Metro-Manila District in planting several churches.

In 1979 the Children's Gardens property in Taytay, Rizal, formerly a Methodist Church sponsored orphanage, was purchased for the seminary. The General Board of the Church of the Nazarene had approved the plan for a graduate seminary as early as 1977 and I was elected to head up the project. In 1980 the first extension seminar was conducted on the Taytay property by Dr. Willard Taylor and me. Those two seminars, and several that followed, were extensions of classes approved and accredited by Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City. During this period of time, the seminary was

experimenting with recruitment of faculty, student enrollment issues, visa concerns, relationship with accrediting associations, and considering its affiliation with Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City. It was not until 1983 that the seminary was formally named Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary as an autonomous graduate school of theology. The relationship of the two seminaries was fraternal rather than administrative. APNTS was to be sponsored by the World Mission Division of the Church of the Nazarene with a Board of Directors selected mainly from the Asia-Pacific Region. I believe the records indicate that I was appointed/elected Director or President on three different occasions during that period of time.

Building bridges can be fulfilling if not strenuous work. Developing a faculty, curriculum, and facilities can be a test of commitment and patience. During the period of uncertainty to which administrative entity the seminary was to be accountable, several fine administrators and faculty members were lost to the mission of the seminary. We also learned a great deal about God's ability to multiply the bread and the fish. Sometimes gold lies nearer to surface than one might think, for God gave APNTS the gift of Dr. Ronald W. Beech. A veteran missionary already in the Philippines, culturally sensitive and gifted educator, Dr. Beech became the first Academic Dean. Since I had been appointed Director of the Asia-Pacific Region, as well as head of the budding seminary, much of the time I was traveling over the Region while Dr. Beech was designing a curriculum and catalogue for 1983-85.

While I have had the joy of planting seed, my successors have done a superb job of putting the seminary "on the world map." I am delighted that APNTS has maintained the logo that we designed at the beginning. The symbolism reflects the mission of the seminary. "Bridging Cultures for Christ" speaks to the essential mission of APNTS while I Tim 2:5 teaches us that Christ, and Christ alone, is adequate to mediate between the ancient cultures and the historical antagonisms that exist in the Asia-Pacific Region. The logo suggests the round circle represents God's presence and prevenience overshadowing that vast area of the earth's planet. The open book is the Bible and the bridge by which the peoples may cross from darkness to light. The window represents the Church through which "Christlikeness" is to shine.

The cross represents the Christ whose death and resurrection provides the only way to be reconciled to God and to each other. The dove represents the Holy Spirit who empowers his people and creates responsiveness among the nations.

On one occasion, Mrs. Neva Beech exclaimed, "I have a 'school song' for us!" It is a good song:

In Christ there is no East or West, In Him no South or North;  
 But one great fellowship of love thro'-out the whole wide earth.  
 In Him shall true hearts every-where their high communion find;  
 His service is the golden cord Close binding all mankind.  
 Join hands then brothers of the faith, What-e'er your race may be;  
 Who serves my Father as a son I surely kin to me.  
 In Christ now meet both East and West; In Him meet South and  
                   North.  
 All Christly souls are one in Him thro'-out the whole wide earth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Sing to the Lord*, 678.