

## TO BOLDLY GO WHERE THE CHURCH HAS GONE BEFORE

Roger L. Hahn, NTS 2017 Commencement

Let me extend my heartiest congratulations to the 2017 NTS graduating class. You have worked long, hard, and well to arrive at this day. More than you can realize your family, your local church or churches and the universal Church of Jesus Christ have loved you, provided for you, and pointed you on this way. It is the culmination of more effort, more prayers, and more tears than any of us can ever know. So, all God's people rejoice today, but you, graduates, especially rejoice and we join you in your joy.

I am not encouraged in the task that lies before me in the next 15 or so minutes. I graduated from NTS 41 years ago this month. I remember my commencement speaker's name and the school of which he was president. I don't remember a single word he said. I also know the statistics of the percent of any content delivered by lecture that is remembered – you would think that would have sent me to a different job long ago. But some of you know that I can't resist the opportunity to put my two cents on the table. So, here are my forgettable words.

Commencement – beginning. Though my initial words of congratulations implied an ending, I, as Dean of the NTS Faculty, NTS as a whole, and academic institutions in general are sticking with the title, Commencement, for this event. In ways more profound than you can know today, especially those of you have been on a continuous education track since kindergarten, in ways more profound than you can know, today marks a beginning. In fact, that represents the fundamental goal of NTS. The mission of Nazarene Theological Seminary is to prepare faithful and effective ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whatever your degree program, our intention was not just for you to finish a degree, but for you to begin and to continue faithful and effective ministry. Many of you are in that very process already. When each of you walk across this platform the Seminary is saying, “We believe you are prepared to begin faithful and effective ministry.” We have no illusions that you know everything you will need to know for a lifetime of faithful and effective ministry. But we are confident that you are prepared to begin discovering what you will need to know, to be, and to do to be faithful and effective for a lifetime of ministry.

It may not be the case in every field or subject, but beginning in ministry means significant uncertainty about the journey and the ending, at least for Arminians. To use the words of Amos, “I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet,” but by all indications you will go from this beginning into ministry in one of the times of most rapid change in the church's history. We've been saying things like that for several decades now, but it seems more true every day. Thomas Friedman's new book, *Thank You for Being Late*<sup>1</sup> suggests that the rate of change is now accelerating – not just more rapidly than ever before, but more rapidly than we can adapt to. For sure the context in which most of you are and will be doing ministry is changing more rapidly than ever before. In his book *The End of White Christian America* Robert Jones notes that twenty five years from now, when many of you will be in the prime of your

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016)

ministry, the US population will no longer be majority white.<sup>2</sup> In 43 years the number of white persons in the US will actually decline for the first time in history, the number of multi-racial persons will triple, and the number of both Hispanics and Asians will double. Today the number of persons in the United States who subscribe to a non-Christian religion or are intentionally unaffiliated with any religion is equal to the number of Christians of every race and denominational label. The most rapidly growing religious group in this country is the intentionally unaffiliated with any religion group. Among persons aged 18-29 in this country more than one of every three is intentionally unaffiliated with any religious group. If trends continue in 34 years there will be more intentionally-unaffiliated-with-religion persons than there will be Protestant Christians in the United States.

We could compile statistics like this from a variety of sources all day, but my point is simply that the context in which this graduating class will minister is changing more rapidly than we can envision. My apologies to our graduates from Canada, India, Africa, Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil, and New Zealand for only giving statistics from the United States, but you already know that similar social change is rapidly accelerating in your own countries. There is no how-to practics book in existence that can tell you what you need to do in the coming days to be effective ministers of the gospel.

Three brief implications of this rapid demographic change in this country. First, the traditions assumptions about Children's and Youth Ministries will not work – they already don't and they won't in the future. The assumption that if we have a good children's program we will attract young families with children is an assumption that is not working today in most churches. It worked when the baby boomers were children, but today there are fewer children in the United States today, at least fewer children who are not immigrant children. And many of the children who are in the society today are children of the intentionally-unaffiliated-with-any-religion parents. The church of which I am a member had our once a quarter intergenerational Sunday School a week ago today. My adult class of approximately 40 persons hosted the 4 and 5 year old class. We had 3 children. The context is changing and the way church has been done no longer is effective in bringing people to Christ. Graduates, you will have to rethink the whole paradigm of children, youth, and family ministries.

The changing demographic has a second significant implication. In a 2013 report to Nazarenes involved in the preparation of clergy we learned that over 65% of the lead pastors of Nazarene churches in the United States were over 50 years of age. Two out of every three Nazarene pastors in this country is over the age of 50. Only 13% of the Nazarene pastoral corps is less than 40 years of age. And the Church of the Nazarene is not unique in the age of its pastoral corps. Most mainline denominations have similar or worse age distributions and several denominations have already reduced the educational requirements for ordination to try to get pastors into churches faster. But it is clear that in 15 years there will not be enough pastors to provide leadership for the existing churches. I suppose you might say it is fortunate that many churches are aging also and many of those will likely close due to lack of sufficient members surviving to keep the doors open. But the rate of pastors retiring or discontinuing is greater than the rate of churches closing.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

Some of you graduates are frustrated that leadership in the church seems reserved for old people, not all of them as competent as you – at least in your mind. I know this because I’ve overheard some of you talking and because I felt exactly the same way when I was graduating from seminary. But the aging of present pastors means that leadership will come to you sooner than might have been the case had you been graduating 20 years ago. You will discover when that transition comes and leadership is thrust upon you that it is not as easy as it sometimes looks. But you will step up and you will become the leaders the church will need – soon and very soon. The changing demographics will change the patterns of leadership transition in your lifetime.

A third implication of the changing context is that the economic assumptions from which American churches have operated will not be sustainable. Financial contributions to churches have been declining for years in the United States. For many of us the financial recession in this country in 2008-2009 brought the matter sharply into focus, but religious giving had been in decline at a slow, but ever accelerating rate for many years prior to the recession. John Dickerson, author of the book, *The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors that will Crash the American Church . . . and How to Prepare*, notes that in 2001 evangelical Christians in this country gave away an average of 4.27% of their income, compared to 6.15% given away in 1968.<sup>3</sup> By 2013 evangelicals were only giving away 3% of their incomes. Dickerson identifies several factors contributing to this decline in financial support of churches. One factor is that the most generous generation in recent history, the builders or the greatest generation according to Tom Brokaw, are dying at the rate of one thousand per day. Though American Christians 65 years of age and older made up only 19% of American church membership four years ago, they contributed 46% of the churches’ giving. Because of this generational change, financial giving in American evangelical churches is projected to drop 50% from 2013 to 2027 and by two-thirds in just over 25 years. Part of the issue is that the giving patterns of each successive generation shows reduced generosity than the preceding generation. In 25 to 30 years donations to churches are projected to drop by 70%. The impact of the changing economic assumptions regarding church and ministry is already being felt in the rapid move toward bi-vocational patterns of ministry. Many of you graduates are anticipating a life-time of ministry that will never involve full-time church employment – not because of lack of faith – as one of my older friends suggested to me recently – but because the economic assumptions about doing church in his generation do not and will not hold in your generation. One of Dickerson’s comments in his chapter on the plummeting financial giving to churches is that American churches have become too dependent on money anyway. The trend of the past 40 years has been to hire church staff – associate pastors – to do the work that lay people had done for generations before. When Church Growth adopted as a key to growing a church the consumerist patterns of Americans who always want more and always shop for ways to get more for less, money became the way to grow a church. The megachurches will presumably still be able to raise the kind of money to build the kind of buildings that house the kinds of programs led by paid staff members that attract more and more members from smaller churches unable to afford such high powered and high priced church products. Though the megachurches are also struggling financially, they will continue to thrive and grow – at least some of them will, but most of you will not be lead pastor or on staff at

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<sup>3</sup> John Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors that will Crash the American Church . . . and How to Prepare* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013).

a megachurch. The house church movement will continue to grow. House churches with bi-vocational pastors can afford to contribute a part time salary to the pastor and a lot to serving those in need. The churches that are bigger than house churches, but smaller than megachurches (that is – almost all churches in this country); those churches will struggle financially in the future and will have to adapt and adopt new financial models to continue to minister.

I have said none of this to speak doom or gloom about the future. I am not wringing my hands about these changes and I see no need for any believer to describe what I have described as something negative. It is simply the way the future looks for the lifetime of ministry that lies ahead of this graduating class. We are sending you out to boldly go where the church has not been before. That was my original title, but as I thought about it times of catastrophic social change are not places the church has never been before. With sufficient research I am sure that one could find analyses almost exactly like those I have just mentioned throughout the fourth and early fifth century as the Roman Empire wavered, crumpled, and fell. The rapidly changing social conditions and demographics we have just rehearsed surely have echoed things Christians said in China in the late 1940s and in Cuba in the early 1960s. They are descriptions of what is happening right now in many parts of Africa and South America. And this changing context is not some soon future in the United States; it is happening right now. We are sending you out to boldly go where the church has often gone before – at least generally, if not specifically. Knowing that is part of the reason we persistently think that the study of Church History is a most practical theological discipline.

In fact, you, class of 2017, understand this better than I do. I sat beside MDiv graduate Josh Pierce at the graduate luncheon yesterday. Josh is planting a church in the South Bay area near San Francisco. 70% of the people where he is planting this church do not know what the Bible is. Josh told several stories at the luncheon of people he meets as he participates in various venues trying to meet people. When they ask him what he does for living, he says he is pastor. They say, “What is that?” He says, “I am planting and leading a church.” They say, “What is a church?” He says, “It is a group of Christians.” They say, “What’s a Christian?” and I say, “What a marvelous context in which to do ministry and to plant a church!” because Jesus said, “Do not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest.’ I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.”

You are prepared to begin faithful and effective ministry in this changed and changing context. Of course you do not know all the details you will come to know, but you do know that the church is the covenant people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. You know the church is the bride of Christ and the family of God. You know that the church is one, the church is holy, the church is catholic, and the church is apostolic. You know that the church is where the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are duly celebrated. You know that the church is evangelical, sacramental, and Pentecostal. You know that ministry is incarnating the life of Christ in the church and in the world. You know that holiness is loving God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. You know that ministry is serving, not being served. You know that regardless of whether it is full-time or bi-vocational (or co-vocational if you prefer that term), ministry is the proclamation and the living out of the gospel.

You know how to exegete Scriptures written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and how to hear that written word speaking in a clear voice for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You know how to exegete your culture so that wherever you go, whatever context in which you find yourself, whoever the people are whom God sends across your path, you know how to learn their language, to learn their hearts, and to learn the deep yearning of their lives that might make them open to the truth of the gospel. You know how to counsel troubled individuals. You know how to form and guide small groups that can hold believers accountable to each other and to Christ. You know how to connect people to the great resources for spiritual formation that God has provided for the church. You know how to think about worship and worship services so that people have an opportunity to encounter the living God. You know how to equip believers to lead people to Christ. You know how to equip believers to disciple their fellow-church members and also to disciple the nations. You know how to connect the rich tradition of the theological heritage of the Christian church to the everyday life needs of believers. You know how to proclaim the gospel. You know some of the ways the church has struggled, failed, and triumphed through its almost two thousand year history. You know how to boldly go where we, the church, has gone before.

You don't know all these things equally well, and you don't know any of these things as well as you will in increasing measure in the years that lie ahead. But you know the sources of the Christian faith in Scripture, theology, history, and practice of ministry and you know how to exegete your culture and by the help of the Holy Spirit you can figure out everything else you will need to know for a lifetime of faithful and effective ministry. You've been called idealistic and naïve when you've shared what you know with some folks in some places. But when the institutions that have described the church for twenty years, for fifty years, for a hundred years, for five hundred years, and for 17 hundred years of Christendom fail, fall, and disintegrate in your lifetime, then those ideals, ideas, and truths that you have learned at seminary will become the new seedbed of the visions of church and ministry that will enable you to faithfully and effectively minister the gospel in whatever context you find yourselves.

So, commence. Go, the fields are ripe for harvesting. Go boldly where we have gone before. And as you go, the Lord will bless you and keep you. The Lord will make his face to shine upon you, and he will be gracious to you. The Lord will lift up his countenance upon you, and he will pour out upon you his *Shalom*. Amen.