

BUILDING NEW BRIDGES
Floyd T. Cunningham
Inauguration Address
Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary
November 20, 2008

Introduction

Our school slogan, since its founding, has remained, “Bridging Cultures for Christ.” There is one (only one) bridge across campus. The present bridge was erected over the old one, which you can still see below it. It is much stronger than the previous one. It was used for the construction of the Nielson Center of Education and Evangelism, and you can drive a dump truck over it. It is built to last. Whereas winding steps led down to the previous bridge, this new bridge makes both sides of our campus accessible for wheelchairs. Practically everyone crosses the bridge on a daily basis. The bridge is so routinely used we forget that there are two sides of our campus, indeed two property deeds. Think of how difficult it would be for us if there were no bridge! We would remain two segmented, divided communities. Furthermore, the bridge reminds us daily of the world in which we live – it floats by, outward to the sea.

Building bridges has been the theme of APNTS and the focus of our vision statement: “Bridging cultures for Christ, APNTS equips each new generation of leaders to disseminate the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Asia, the Pacific, and the world.” The initial thought in Donald Owens’s mind in the phrase “Bridging Cultures for Christ” was that many people groups remained enemies of each other – or, if not enemies, estranged from each other or misunderstood. Indeed there are few earthly reasons for fellowship: different languages, different religions, and past wars separate people. But those who come to APNTS from the Philippines, Korea, Japan, Myanmar, the United States, and many other countries are one if they are in Christ. APNTS brings together divided people, and establishes new relationships transcending old estrangements.

Owens may have been influenced by a classic little book by Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, published in 1955. McGavran criticized a “mission station approach” to evangelism, and sought, rather, to find how God has already implanted “eternity in the hearts” of people, and how God is already at work. McGavran focused on reaching groups of people, not individuals, with the gospel – which was a strategy peculiarly fit for India, where McGavran served as a missionary, and Korea, which Owens knew well, as well as other parts of Asia and the Pacific. While many missions in the last 50 years have adopted McGavran’s approach, seminaries have remained stations or compounds, somewhat like monasteries, rather than life-giving movements of God.

The church, late General Superintendent Raymond Hurn wrote, must not crawl into its “own little enclave, polish the saints, refuse contact with outsiders, maintain personal piety, and totally miss the real mission of Christ in the world.” (*Mission Possible: A Study of the Mission of the Church of the Nazarene* [Kansas City: NPH, 1973], 82). Seminaries are not churches, but the same admonishment pertains: we must not crawl into our own little enclave, educate the elite, refuse contact with outsiders, maintain personal piety and doctrinal integrity, and totally miss the mission of God. How can we best “prepare men and women for Christ-like leadership and excel-

lence in ministry,” as our mission statement directs? By our school finding out what it means to be a holy people of God, and ministering right here in Taytay.

Foundation

Bridges require foundations. Christ himself is the sure foundation. As a proudly denominational school, strongly loyal to the Church of the Nazarene, our biblical, historical and theological foundations are unshakeable.

Christian Foundations. The Bible remains the means by which we understand Christ, the rule under which we construct theology. By it we judge all other sources of knowledge of God. The Bible, as our Articles of Faith affirm, contains “all things necessary to our salvation.”

Nazarenes rightly have been concerned about right doctrine, grounded upon the Word spoken to humankind. We have as Articles of Faith not ones that either John Wesley or Phineas Bresee composed or called councils to decide. The doctrines were given to Nazarenes, as if a gift, from the centuries. Our possession of Articles of Faith indicates our indebtedness to the catholic tradition of the Christian Church. Ours are the great Christological and Trinitarian affirmations of the Church.

Wesleyan Foundations. We read the Bible through the lens that we inherit, shaped by John Wesley. In different times and places, I note as a historian of the church, Nazarenes have embodied the legacy somewhat differently, yet remain unabashedly Wesleyan. As Wesleyans, the heart of our faith is grace flowing to us all from God through the atoning work of Christ and applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

We affirm free grace *from Christ* for all. This democratic grace knows no distinctions of race, gender or economic standing. Nazarene evangelism builds on this, extending the gospel invitation to all, and Nazarene theological education also builds upon this, endeavoring to be accessible to all of those who are called, no matter their place or station in life.

We affirm prevenient grace leading *toward Christ*, calling everyone to salvation. Through prevenient grace, God allows human beings moral choice and enables us to exercise faith. Through prevenient grace God allows human beings to understand nature, and to look for God’s self-disclosure in the world. The Holy Spirit actively prepares the way for the gospel.

We affirm the assurance of grace *in Christ* to our salvation. Our sense of the Holy Spirit’s presence is close. At the same time, our expectation is that there are repeated times in our lives of spiritual outpouring and blessing. Though we teach the importance of understanding God rightly, our direct awareness of God’s love floods and fills our own hearts with love.

We affirm sanctifying grace. We possess such an optimism of grace that we believe that men and women can be transformed and made holy *by Christ* and kept holy by the Spirit of Christ, in this life. A gracious moment of entire sanctification, and a subsequent walk *in Christ*, produces Christ-likeness among us.

Nazarene Foundations. What is the point of having a solidly built bridge with firm foundations that no one uses? It might be magnificent, beautiful – but useless. What would be the point?

To possess doctrines of grace that we have not experienced, and yet pass on, will not do. This is *not* Nazarenes' passion or calling, to pass on theology divorced from experience. The consuming desire among Nazarenes for one hundred years has not been to transmit doctrine; it has been, rather, to draw many into the transforming presence of God through Christ's sanctifying Spirit to produce Christ-like disciples in the nations.

The Church of the Nazarene has its own ethos, set by careful balances. In education, the foundations of our church seek a balance between holiness of heart and well-prepared minds. The objective, as stated in the philosophy of education developed between 1948 and 1952, is "a fusion of holy character and sound education." The Church of the Nazarene affirms the balance between revelation and reason, and stresses the liberal arts. We are not intimidated by any sincere search for truth. Ministerial education is built upon the assumption that pastors must possess a wide spectrum of knowledge in order to understand and to communicate to the current generation.

In our early history, almost as soon as we Nazarenes entered a new country, we established schools for educating pastors and Christian workers – and (no matter that we thought Jesus would soon appear a second time) not short-term, fast-track training schools, but real four-year programs, often at the baccalaureate level (especially here in this part of the world). Eventually the church established graduate programs in key areas, the first being APNTS. Our school is built upon firm foundations and has been the bridge linking people together on this region and to other parts of the world.

Our bridge's foundations link us to the past and shape our mission, vision and current objectives. If we appreciate our heritage and if we are loyal to it, we will want to seek all possible means of conveying its message to people.

Building Bridges

In his book *Creative Ministry* Henri Nouwen noted that often theological students begin with the "how" questions – how do I preach?, how do I be of help to a couple facing marital crises?, how do I assist a dying patient? But this is soon overwhelmed with the realization that there is an "I" asking these questions who must possess psychological and spiritual awareness – must grapple with personal history, with weaknesses, temptations, frailties. Whenever ministry education pulls away from the personal experience of the teachers and the learners, Nouwen warns, it becomes disembodied, and learners become "blind to what is happening right in front of them." Though building competencies in ministry are necessary, no act can really be called "ministry," Nouwen says, unless competency is grounded in the "radical commitment to lay down one's own life in the service of others" (Rev. ed. [New York: Doubleday, 2003], 16; 6).

APNTS provides a place for enacting such radical commitment. We at APNTS have the joy and privilege of being more easily like a community than some seminaries are able to be – facing as we do the cycles of life, courtships and marriages, the miracles of birth, the joys of baptism,

the fears of cancer, undergoing suffering, healing, even death. APNTS offers opportunities for knowing oneself as well as knowing God by interacting with fellow learners with those from other cultures. Living daily with each other, interpersonal and intercultural conflicts serve either to drive us apart or to further us in Christ-likeness.

Furthermore, APNTS has the opportunity, like churches, to build bridges beyond its walls, to evangelize, to find how God is working in those around us, to engage flesh-and-blood people, not just “the world” in some abstract sense: we are a breathing, living, pulsating community – not preparing to be, but here and now the body of Christ.

The Seminary, as any body of Christ, must embody holiness corporately, corporeally. Within this body, even here, we possess different roles, which, as described in Ephesians 4:2-13, are intended to glorify Christ, not ourselves as individuals. Even here, within our own community, some are called to be apostles, others prophets, some evangelists, others pastors and teachers. We do not need to hope as individuals to possess each calling, or to be jealous of others with different roles in the body of Christ. We rejoice in what we are called to be, and equally rejoice, when we are mature enough, in the calling of our sisters and brothers. Only together, the body is whole. Singly, we do not accomplish the mission of Christ. The apostle Paul pleads for the corporate obedience of the church: within its essential way of being, embodying holiness; within its administrative and leadership, embodying holiness; within its ways of witnessing to the world, embodying holiness. (See J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *Holiness and Community in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1: Paul's View of Communal Holiness in the Corinthian Correspondence* [New York: Peter Lang, 2001], 169, drawing upon Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996], 196-197. See also *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth*, eds. Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl [Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999]).

Building bridges to our own churches. Our loyalty and responsibility is to actual local churches, primarily those of the Church of the Nazarene. We do not exist for the sake of existing; we exist to serve local churches and districts. In order to serve them, we must not talk so much as listen, not seek so much to be understood as to understand. It is necessary for a Nazarene seminary to re-express our theological heritage. To do so effectively we must understand the minds and hearts of people in the world, and in the pews, and the daily pressures of pastors. We must earn the privilege of guiding the church and not assume it as a right. We cannot come before people and long-suffering pastors with relevant answers before we have listened to the questions.

What is our role in equipping the church – both laypersons and those called out — for ministry? We here are rich in resources, people, land, books, time, and so much else, but these are not ours to hoard. How can we effectively share what we have – how can we be part of the bridges God is building? I see APNTS as becoming “experimental” in the way that every body of Christ must be, availing of rapidly paced technology (which helped secure the election of my country's new president), while engaging people in traditional, interpersonal ways: conversing with women at wells, washing one another's feet, and, by all means, saving some.

Building bridges to other churches. Wesley said “if your heart is right, give me your hand.” This statement came in a sermon after a long list of essential Christian beliefs. What unites Christians confessing Christ as Lord is greater than that which separates them. As a semi-

nary that warmly accepts persons of other denominations while resolutely retaining our distinctiveness, our non-Nazarene students often have journeyed to deeper understandings and appreciations for their own denominations, and, at the same time, have taken back to their churches high aspirations of teaching, preaching and interpreting Christian holiness.

Building bridges to our community. Seminary education must not only convey knowledge, build competency, and shape character, but direct attention to our immediate context of ministry. Through going out to seek and touching those surrounding us we lessen the distance between the Seminary and the world. Even if we wished, we do not live in isolation – there is a symbiotic relationship between the seminary and the larger community. *We* are the “creek” community as much as those neighbors who share our walls. We must think outside the walls and reach beyond whatever seals off the church, by bridging the walls that separate us from the people among whom we live.

In order to take the message entrusted to us, we must build bridges in this local community, in this barangay, in Taytay. I know we are called to the whole world; I know we are international; that will not change. But as we go to “Samaria,” and to the “uttermost parts of the world,” we must not neglect our own “Jerusalem.” We need to learn how to engage in actual conversation with our immediate community. What can we contribute to this city? What can we add to its leaders, how can we bless its tinderas, how can we enable its educators, how can we impact its business people, how can we touch its street children. We have no silver or gold. That is good. Other agencies, other parts of the body of Christ, have such resources. What is it that we, particularly, as a multi-national graduate theological seminary in the Wesleyan tradition, what is it that we have to offer? Where others draw circles to keep people out, we can enlarge circles to encompass them. The circles we draw will be inclusive of both us and them – by movements of God’s grace dissolving any distinction between “us” and “them.” We are to be one in Christ.

Bridges build relationships among previously separated people. That means destroying attitudes of superiority and condescension between rich and poor persons, or even between teachers and students, and any other distinctions that objectify others. The bridge we want to build is not a one-way bridge. People come and go on it.

Our bridges will instill self-worth and self-esteem in all with whom we are in conversation on the bridge. Building bridges means giving, but not only giving, also receiving from those among whom we live, teachers learning from students, those deemed poor giving to those deemed rich. Such bridges demand that before “doing” compassion we must have compassionate bilateral relationships.

As a community, we are trying to discern what it means collectively to follow Jesus. Can we find out what this means in an orderly processed, pre-packaged, handed-down fashion? No. No, no, no; we cannot. Count on holy disarray (hopefully not total chaos), and plenty of mistakes as together we find out what it means to be a holy people of God here and now.

My assumption and hope is that if we are endeavoring to discover what it means to be the body of Christ here and now, to build bridges in this particular place, our students will take that same stance and ask that same question in any place of ministry: what does it mean for us, here and now, to be the holy people of God?

Building bridges to this generation. We embrace children and youth with both our arms and the academic programs we together construct. Encompassing both women and children, in Matthew 18 Jesus speaks of the *mikron*, the seemingly insignificant ones, and warns, “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones.” Our Wesleyan heritage gives us a kind of homing instinct toward those without advantages in society. This is the mission of the Church of the Nazarene and other holiness churches in the world: to go to the neglected people and remote quarters of the world and irregardless of race and ethnicity establish centers of holy fire. We are called to go to the despised of this world and embrace them with the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Is it hard for us disciples to change and become like a little child, as Jesus demands? Perhaps less hard if we live among such as these.

Regarding youth, Mildred Bangs Wynkoop reminded my generation that “the very thing which our [holiness] forefathers had, essentially, was the spirit of revolution. They were not quiet, comfortable, placid, undisturbed people. They seethed with energy. They saw visions which sent them crashing through barriers of impossibilities. They dreamed dreams and brought forth sold realities.” Wynkoop described “essential Wesleyanism” as “sanctified revolution.” “This is a young person’s religion,” she suggested. “There is life in it.” (*John Wesley: Christian Revolutionary* [Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1970], 14-15). My own sense of that life and spirit in the Church of the Nazarene inspired me then and inspires me now.

If we Nazarenes consider ourselves still to be a movement, and if we are loyal to holiness as life and doctrine, we will want to seek all possible means of conveying that to this generation, which is increasingly alike around the globe. Our attention to the contexts of ministry demands that we not just preach and teach but that we demonstrate our message to this generation. We as a community seeking to be holy must grab the attention of this generation. To do so we need to personally examine the conditions, the thoughts, the aspirations, the languages of youth.

Sociologist Wade Clark Roof asserts (*Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* [Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1999], 163, 307, and throughout) that this is a seeking generation, one repulsed by a “we have found it” mentality. Though strengthened by firm foundations, we are still a movement, not considering ourselves as yet having arrived at its final destination; and we hope that as we walk along a road together, with Christ in our midst, he will still be talking to us, whispering to us about himself, until the end of the age. As Paul puts it, Ephesians 2:22, we are being built – we are not yet completed – we are in the process of rising to become a holy temple in the Lord, as a community, collectively, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

The Future

I am tempted to talk about building bridges to the future. I know that five- or ten-year plans are necessary. But sometimes, perhaps, Jesus says, “You are here and now and every moment that you spend planning for, thinking about, worrying about the future robs you of essential moments today with those immediately around you. Then when tomorrow arrives, you will still be thinking about the future, instead of ever enjoying my immediate presence and those of your brothers and sisters.” Jesus seems to say, “I will be there just as now. Just rest; celebrate my presence. Just be.” If we rest and “be” just now, we will be stronger in the days ahead. We will not miss the question, “What are we to be here, now, in this place?” We are walking along a

path, building bridges, with eyes fixed on the end, but would not Jesus say, “I am not only your past and your future, I am the one beside you, here, now; the Eternal present. Look at those beside you just now, right here; look at those at your doors; what present moment is there to seize?”

“Bridging Cultures for Christ” remains our motto. There is one (only one) Bridge that can unite cultures, one Bridge between God and human beings, the man Jesus Christ. Across campus, we are united because of that one Bridge between us and others, Jesus Christ. That Bridge far surpasses any other relationships that might try to bring people together. Yes, you can still see the old cultures, as you can see the old bridge, but Christ, like our new bridge, is strong and surpasses what rests underneath. He will last forever. You can drive a dump truck of sin over him; his grace is sufficiently strong. He reminds us, as our bridge, of a broken and hurting world, for which he died. He builds no barriers, no winding steps: all men and women, and children are accessible to him. “Do not hinder them,” he says. “Come unto me.” In Christ the Bridge we forget that we are many, for out of many we have become one. We come to each other because of Christ. We would not function as one community without this Bridge. We would remain segmented – divided, two. But in him we become one.

Having seen here at APNTS the indispensability of the bridge, we are compelled to build new bridges to others, build new bridges on sure foundations, build bridges that will bring people to oneness in Christ. These new bridges will not be our own workmanship: we are trying to discern where God already is constructing them. These are bridges of God. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, we may join him in his work. With new dreams comes revitalization, and I have dreams of new bridges.