



# 'Asianifying' the Church

Adapting the Western approach to teaching theology in the East.

By Jim Blumenstock, with Paul Luce and Leah D. Pickard

“The first class I taught for the Asia Biblical Theological Seminary (ABTS) was in Iloilo, Philippines, in 2001. I was relatively new to graduate-level teaching: a young man of 26-years-old, fresh out of seminary, and most certainly an idealist. I had carefully planned my lessons but I was still incredibly nervous. *Do I really have enough material to talk for 40 hours? Will the students listen to a 26-year-old professor? Should I be doing this at all?* While these questions were definitely relevant, the first day revealed that I should have been asking an entirely different question.”

*“Am I ready to teach in Asia?”*

Twelve years later, Jim Blumenstock continues to recall his first days at ABTS from its headquarters in Chiang Mai, Thailand. “The topic was angelology. This was the easiest topic for me to prepare since there was so little written on it: just 18 pages in our textbook. Based on my notes, I figured the lectures and discussion would last one hour; maybe two max. Much to my surprise, the discussion spanned two full days. What I thought was pretty straightforward quickly became extremely complicated when the students started asking questions.”

The student’s questions were overwhelming. “I was utterly ill-prepared. I stumbled around, grasping for answers, but realized that my training was woefully insufficient in this area. Clearly, I hadn’t given enough thought to these passages, and obviously they had.”



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*In addition to serving as Dean of the Asia Biblical Theological Seminary, Jim Blumenstock is also a professor.*

### East Meets West

In the years that followed that exchange, ABTS leadership set out to refine how theology was taught, aiming to become an “East meets West seminary,” says Jim, who now serves as the school’s dean. “While we want to become more Asian in how we think and what we teach, we also want to keep the good parts of a Western-style of education. We want to communicate both ideas and stories; philosophies and examples; doctrines and illustrations.”

This re-evaluation of what it means to be a North American seminary in Asia meant looking at how to best prepare Asian believers for ministry. At ABTS, theological education is no longer a set of lesson plans confined to a classroom. It is a holistic challenge for students to take their book knowledge and translate it into a real-world ministry that will impact their culture.

How does ABTS do this?

“First, we listen,” says Jim. “Unfortunately, this is not something theologians are very good at. We tend to think we have all the answers. But it is so important to listen to our Asian brothers and sisters about how God is moving among churches in Asia and what problems they are facing. Secondly, we commit to learn from one another, no matter

our culture or location. Finally, we look for places we need to change — whether that means adapting our curriculum, shifting our teaching methods or reevaluating our strategies.”

### Theology in Action

For ABTS graduate, Dan Formento, nothing exemplified this philosophy of ministry more than an encounter with an angry teenager named Kenneth.

In 2001, Dan walked away from a potential engineering job to become a pastor in the Philippines. After meeting Kenneth at church, Dan took him to a local fast-food restaurant to talk. As the teen opened up, the young pastor was suddenly peppered with angry questions. Kenneth’s father had abandoned him, leaving a gaping hole he had filled with rage and rebellion. Dan knew Kenneth’s pain all too well. His own father had left his mother and four siblings when Dan was only a toddler. Although he

# ABTS at a Glance

**Year Founded:** 1982

**Regional Office:** Chiang Mai, Thailand

**Seminar Site Locations:**

Bangkok, Thailand; Delhi, India; Cagayan de Oro, Manila, Illoio, and Baguio, Philippines; Yangon, Myanmar; Singapore and Goroka, Papua New Guinea

**Degrees Offered:**

In-Ministry Master of Religious Education  
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in Bible, Theology and Ministry

accepted Christ at an early age, Dan also struggled to forgive his father.

Kenneth connected with Dan over this shared experience, and as Dan developed a mentoring relationship, Kenneth began to work through his own pain.

One day, Dan was able to share how he met his father as an adult and forgave him. That act of profound love amazed Dan's father and he became a Christian that same day.

As Dan shared his testimony, Kenneth's heart was awakened to a deeper understanding of the gospel. For Dan, the exchange brought the ABTS philosophy of ministry to life. Until this point, he had seen youth ministry as a stepping-stone. Suddenly, he realized he was uniquely equipped to minister to the young people he came in contact with.

"Every time I learned something from ABTS, the first audience I shared it with was my young people," he says. "I saw amazing growth in their understanding of the Bible."

**FACULTY**

**Professors:** 4

**Adjunct Faculty:** 21

**STUDENTS**

**Average Age:** 41.5

**Places of Origin:**

Australia, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Myanmar, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, South Asia, South Korea, Thailand, US, Vietnam

**How They Serve:**

Administration, Associate Pastor, Bible College Teacher, Camping Ministry, Chaplain, Christian Educator, Evangelist, Lay Leader, Leadership Trainer, Literature Ministry, Missionary, Pastor, Professors, Sports Ministry, Youth Ministry

**IN 2012**

**Completion Rate:** 84%

- 145 students attended
- 223 course enrollments plus 27 audits representing 17 countries
- 28 graduates from 8 countries
- 11 graduates in the first commencement in Papua New Guinea – *ABTS is the first graduate-level theological program in the country*
- First ABTS resident courses were taught in India
- 39 new applications received
- \$41,000 raised for ABTS scholarships to assist Asians in poorer economies

**SINCE 1982**

**Total Graduates:** 306 – from 23 countries



*Students at the ABTS go on to serve as pastors, teachers, and Christian leaders in their home countries.*

Dan learned from ABTS that his theological education wasn't of much use if it stayed locked in "the ivory tower" of higher education — it needed relevance in the real world.

### **The Resurrection of a Ministry**

Before ABTS, Pastor Jhun Cairo was convinced he was a failure.

At 21-years-old, Jhun became the senior pastor of a church after being the associate pastor for just six months. He served nine grueling years believing that, as head pastor, the success of his church depended solely on him.

"It was so hard," Jhun remembers. "You come to the point where you just feel so tired."

Unable to keep up with the pressure, Jhun resigned.

He engaged in a period of intense self-evaluation and concluded that he had failed.

But God wasn't finished with him yet.

"I thank the Lord because he is the God of second chances," Jhun says. "Through his Word, I realized I had the wrong motivations when I started out in ministry." Jhun was trying to do everything himself and had come up lacking.

God led him to Ephesians 4:12: "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints

for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."

This renewed perspective helped Jhun use his God-given gifts to help equip others in ministry so that he didn't have to carry the burden alone. What had been his area of greatest failure was about to become a great success.

### **Outreach Explosion**

Recharged and ready for ministry, Jhun knew he needed to get back into ABTS, where he had briefly studied before his resignation. However, tuition was an issue. Nearly 84 percent of the seminary's students come from poor families in rural areas. While each course costs \$465, substantial donations to a scholarship fund allow ABTS leadership to grant scholarships that reduce the price in the Philippines down to just \$60 per course. Still, this reduced portion can still be a hardship for students, who often seek further funding assistance from their sending churches, ministry partners and families.

“ ABTS takes the best of the Eastern world and the best of the Western world and teaches students to apply God’s truth within a global context .”

Fortunately for Jhun, a member of his former congregation recognized his newfound zeal and agreed to fund his education at ABTS.

“We can never underestimate what the Lord can do when we delight in Him!” Jhun exclaims.

Now a pastor in the Philippines, Jhun is transforming the lessons he has learned at ABTS into sermons for his congregation. He recalls how a series of sermons on reaching the lost ignited the church of 100 believers with a newfound excitement for the gospel.

“It’s very exciting to see how many people have been saved and how the members of the church are evangelizing and praying for their communities and families,” Jhun says.

Jhun has also helped many of the church’s men develop as leaders to work alongside him in the ministry. Several men now lead evangelistic outreaches to neighboring towns.

“I’ve learned about being humble before God and to allow the Holy Spirit to do His part in my life and my ministry,” Jhun says.

#### A Vision for the Future

With more than 300 graduates representing 23 Asian countries, Dan and Jhun are by no means the only pastors benefiting from ABTS.

As the church in Asia continues to expand, Jim believes the seminary’s “East Meets West” vision will help strengthen the body of Christ.

“In many respects, the Asian church of today closely resembles the early church during the first four centuries A.D.,” Jim explains. “Christianity has to compete with

Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, communism and atheism. Because of this, the Christian church is trying to understand its identity within communities and cultures that have had very little history with the gospel.”

And while the church in Asia is growing rapidly, it is very young and immature.

“Some countries, like the Philippines, have great depth in their Christian leadership. But other countries, like China, can’t keep up with the growth,” he says. “We desperately need to provide a solid Biblical foundation to prepare church leaders to lead their growing congregations in this pluralistic setting.”

But as long as Christianity is viewed as a Western religion, it will have a hard time taking root in Asia.

“What church leaders need in this setting is a solid grounding in God’s Word. However, they need a solid grounding that is thoroughly Asian. (continued)



"They need to demonstrate to people that Christianity is not a foreign and Western religion. They need to be faithful to the Christian tradition, but also realize that tradition must become incarnate if it is to be understood and accepted — if Christianity wears a Western face, it will not take root in Asia. So the deepening of the Asian church necessitates an 'Asianifying' of the Asian church," Jim says.

The East Meets West vision of ABTS will enable Asian church leaders to develop a unique identity for the body of Christ in Asia. It will empower the Asian church to stand on its own two feet, while remaining faithful to the gospel — and sharing its unique perspectives with the rest of the world.

"It demonstrates that the West has as much to learn from Asian believers as they have from us," Jim says. "In the end, both sides are enriched as we all pilgrim together, awaiting the fullness of God's Kingdom." ■

 To support the ABTS scholarship fund, visit [www.abwe.org/give/projects/abts-scholarships](http://www.abwe.org/give/projects/abts-scholarships)

 In Canada, call 877.690.1009



## ABTS History

Asia Biblical Theological Seminary was opened in 1982 to train new pastors of church plants. Missionaries from the Philippine Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (PABWE) reached out to ABWE, Dr. John Lillis, then with Baptist Mid-Mission, and Cornerstone University's Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. PABWE missionaries realized that people who were training new pastors and church planters needed a master's level education to prepare them for this task. Within a year, Lillis brought the seminary's accredited In-Ministry Master of Religious Education degree to the Philippines, and ABTS was born.

Courses are now taught by a combination of Grand Rapids Theological Seminary professors, qualified American and Asian adjunct professors, and residential ABWE missionaries, along with missionaries from other organizations.

The seminary offers fully accredited masters degrees including In-Ministry Master of Religious Education and a Masters of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in Bible, Theology and Ministry.

