

A Philippine Reflection: Asian Theological Seminary and Two New Programs

Timoteo Gener
Asian Theological Seminary

Two key strategic priorities – vocation formation among the diaspora and communal spiritual formation – emerged from consultations with global partners and the *Vital SustainAbility Initiative*. These two priorities are translated into new programs fulfilling the seminary’s mission of quality theological education for the Asian region and beyond.

Introduction

In 2012, Asian Theological Seminary (ATS) and two other Majority World schools partnered with consultants from *ScholarLeaders* (SL) and Overseas Council (OC) U.S. to write comprehensive faculty development programs. This first project led to a series of interactions that have shaped the strategy and future of our institution. Through this consultation, ATS created a faculty plan for 2014-2018. Our work also led to the development of plans for online learning and a doctoral program in contextual theology.

We continued the partnership with SL and OC under the *Vital SustainAbility Initiative* (VSI) for Majority World schools. Consultations in 2016-2017 helped ATS review previous plans and reconfigure a new plan for 2017-2022.

A focus on vocation unifies the new plan, a focus which was previously articulated in the planning back in 2013 but not fully realized. In essence, this focus means serving students’ training needs without detracting from their current vocations. It entails a shift from merely offering academic degrees to meeting students in their ongoing work, from a teacher-centered orientation to a learner-centered orientation.

The new strategy or plan includes a ministry training center for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), revitalized spiritual formation, maximized use of campus property to meet training needs and raise third stream revenues, and increased partnership with alumni, churches, and organizations.

This brief reflection will focus on the first two aspects of the new plan: the ministry training center for OFWs and the initiative for communal spiritual growth. The former concerns an outward missional direction. The latter offers a prophetic contribution to the life of God’s global people and a way to renew vocation formation in the Church and the seminary through loving relationships.

Vocation Formation in the Diaspora

Shifting educational, cultural, and vocational realities often seem to impinge on the development of Christian leaders. For ATS, these realities include an increased number of bi-vocational students, distance challenges, changes in digital technologies, government pressures, geopolitical and interreligious threats, and the demand for flexible delivery formats. Yet such realities actually enhance the local, contextual strengths of theological education. For ATS, responding to these realities is integral to furthering God’s mission. Equipping Christian workers while accounting for such complexities enables ATS to contribute to God’s kingdom outreach.

For example, one major group within the Filipino Evangelical constituency that needs ministerial training is the Filipino diaspora, especially OFWs. Such training is not extraneous to ATS’s mission. Although OFWs do not live within the geographical Filipino context, ministering to them fits with ATS’s mission of teaching for transformation beyond the Philippines. For instance, many Christian OFWs working in cross-cultural settings are thrust into preaching, evangelism, teaching, and leading small groups, even churches, without any in-depth training in pastoral ministries.

Conservative estimates say that OFWs around the world number about four and half million (Sicat, 2012). Around 10 per cent (450 thousand) of OFWs are Protestant Christians. Thus, one study concludes that OFW Evangelical believers are a “potential significant force of Kingdom workers” (Tira and Wan, 2009).

One of the questions that ATS asked during consultations was, “How could the seminary facilitate ministry training for these potential Kingdom workers?” ATS also needed to identify the qualities of the ideal graduate of such a diaspora-focused program. Regarding the former, what will be the means of training this dispersed population? Regarding the latter, do we envision ideal graduates to be church planters, evangelists, or influencers in the marketplace?

To answer the second of these questions, the seminary settled on a philosophy of ministry that reaches beyond the organized church. A narrow definition of ministry does not honor the actual professions of OFWs as what they are. For instance, engineers who work to build oil plants and railroads are themselves doing acts of spiritual service and worship through their professions. Therefore, ATS’s broadened definition accounts for a diversity of ministerial expressions and steers away from a sacred-secular divide. ATS envisions the following ideal

graduates: Christ-like servant leaders who are equipped to live and work reflectively in their ministries among the diaspora.

As to the question of strategy, ATS consulted its partner organizations. ATS recognized the need to consider the weekly workload of OFWs as skilled professionals. Most of them, even if they desire to train for ministry, can only give limited time to study. Moreover, face-to-face classes would require overseas travel and thus would be difficult for ATS to sustain financially. Rather than the traditional, face-to-face approach, hybrid and fully online settings can facilitate learning for greater flexibility and financial viability. ATS has actually launched a pilot training program this year (2019) particularly for OFWs in the Gulf region. This involves flexible training formats – online certificate and graduate diploma programs conducted via short videos and video conferencing – for OFWs with varying degrees of involvement.

New Initiatives for Communal Spiritual Growth

In the seminary context, spiritual formation of Christian workers and leaders is “not the shaping of a compartment of a Christian’s life, but the rounding out of his personality, his self, in Jesus Christ” (Clemmons, 2004). Through spiritual formation, the seminary becomes a place where God brings about personal and corporate transformation as people come to know, love, and serve Christ.

ATS has put personal spiritual formation at the top of its training objectives: “To pursue and foster personal spiritual formation, which is demonstrated by integrity, loving service, and holistic discipleship” (Asian Theological Seminary Catalogue, 2010-2013). At the heart of spiritual formation is the goal of Christlikeness through the head, heart, hands, and habits of community members.

Why do we need to revitalize spiritual formation in our current setting? First, even if spiritual formation has been stated as a training priority, ATS has not attended to it in previous planning, especially as compared to the attention given to academic and ministerial skills. Second, most of ATS’s spiritual formation practices center on individual spirituality (an inheritance from the West), often neglecting any communal dimension. Finally, while small group discipleship is becoming a more common tool in most churches, small groups often serve to increase local membership rather than to promote spiritual formation.

In 2016, in an effort to revitalize this area, ATS’s chaplaincy committee developed a program for spiritual formation. Adonis Gorospe, a professor of theology and spirituality and a member of the chaplaincy, used part of his sabbatical at Asbury Theological Seminary to chart a proposal for the program. Gorospe suggested that the program take holiness as an overarching framework, center around ATS’s missional priorities, and this began last Fall. He offered the following vision:

Depend on and generously and lovingly serve God and others[.]
Effectively witness for Christ in diverse cultural contexts[.]
Study the Word of God diligently, handle it responsibly, communicate it effectively, and obey it wholeheartedly[.]
Be a multicultural community that celebrates... unity in Christ and... diversity as God's people[.]
Strive for excellence that glorifies God in all areas of life.
Value participation and accountability and... seek each other's mutual benefit.
Seek to be... wise, good, and faithful steward[s] of creation and of the gifts and resources God has given. (Gorospe 2016)

To attain these goals, Gorospe advocated for the Wesleyan model as especially viable for ATS (Watson, 2013, 41, and Wesley, 1984, 9:69-75). Charles Wesley believed that holiness is essential to the life of every Christian. According to Wesley, God raised up preachers “To reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land.” By holiness, Wesley meant loving God and neighbor in all practical ways. The “General Rules” of Wesley were in fact practical guidelines to living a life of holiness, i.e., a life of loving God and one's neighbor. The Wesleyan model emphasizes such holiness attained through community – specifically, through small groups. The emphasis on small groups, not individual spirituality, fits well with the relationality of ATS's Filipino cultural context.

ATS adopted specific guidelines for small groups. Rose Mary Dougherty uses the phrase “group companionship” for this practice. As she writes,

The process works best with a group of four people, though the number can be as few as three or as many as five. Sufficient time for prayer together and sharing each other's understanding of spiritual companionship must be provided in the beginning to allow for discernment by each one as to the rightness of being part of the group. It must be noted that the more the diverse the faith perspectives of each member, the richer the collective wisdom of the group will be. (Dougherty, 1995, 10)

Also, it is important that each be aware of each other's faith experience and familiar with one another's faith language before initiating the process of group companionship.

This practice may continue long-term, depending on group members' desires, as Gorospe stated:

The group may agree to meet for a period of ten to twelve months. They may continue to meet for the same duration if, after a review of the past year's sessions, the group deems it right to continue [to] do so. (Gorospe, 2016)

Gorospe, along with the chaplaincy committee, suggested other concrete steps for enhancing communal spirituality. Chapel times and the celebration of communion

will be held more often, and the seminary will embrace more community events such as spiritual emphasis week, community prayer day, and the daily office – all of which are geared toward deepening communal spiritual growth.

More could be developed from Gorospe’s proposal. Tying this program to existing courses on spiritual companioning and spiritual formation, ATS could develop a new academic focus on group companioning. Indeed, group companioning as a central feature of spiritual formation at ATS and as an area of study might actually present a prophetic critique of the use of small groups as a church growth tool in other contexts.

In terms of the program itself, the Wesleyan model could be enhanced with a sharper Christological focus, with a concern for creation, with application of the doctrine of the priesthood of every believer, and with consideration of the role of academic study in spiritual formation. Beyond the Wesleyan frame, spiritual formation could draw from multi-denominational practices of spirituality.

Moreover, the proposed program could be supplemented by strategies that would cater to students’ personal formation, as well as spiritual development of faculty. These include courses or subjects on soul care and facilitating spiritual retreats. Such courses reinforce the personal formation of students existing through community-wide care groups in the seminary.

Conclusion

ATS’s mission involves equipping Christian leaders who will transform Church and society within and beyond Asia. Our new focus on vocation enhances this mission. Indeed, the socio-cultural particularities of vocation formation highlight the contextual (Asian) and missional nature of theological education at ATS. Under its new initiatives, ATS will educate members of the Filipino diaspora for ministry in workplaces around the world, and it will deploy a uniquely Filipino emphasis on community for richer spiritual formation.

Admittedly, the program still lacks strategies for spiritual formation via ATS’s new online platform, which would be crucial for ministering to the digital generation and especially to OFWs. A new hybrid program on spiritual companioning is on the way, and perhaps the hybrid platform will be better for the dynamics of spiritual formation training. Our conversations continue.

References

- Clemmons, William. "Spiritual Formation in Seminary Education." *Review and Expositor* 101, no. 1 (2004): 41-66.
- Dougherty, Rose Mary, *Group Spiritual Direction*. New York: Paulist, 1995. 10-11.
- Gorospe, Adonis. "ATS Spiritual Formation Program." Presentation to ATS Chaplaincy Committee, March, 2016.
- Tira, Sadiri Joy and Enoch Wan. "The Filipino Experience in Diaspora Missions: A Case Study of Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts." June 12-13 2009.
http://www.wcc2006.info/fileadmin/files/edinburgh2010/files/Study_Process/EDINBURGH%20COMMISSION%20VII%20tira%20diaspoa.pdf.
- Watson, Kevin M. *Pursuing Social Holiness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 41, footnotes 13 and 14.
- Wesley, John. *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. Edited by Thomas Jackson. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984. 9:69-75, 11:433.
- Yung, Hwa. "Energizing Community: Theological Education's Relational Mandate." Presentation, ICETE Conference, Sopron, Hungary. October 2009.
- Sicat, Gerardo. "Overseas Filipino Workers." *Philippine Star*, September 22, 2012.
<http://www.econ.upd.edu.ph/perse/?p=1585>.



Dr. Timoteo Gener

Timoteo Gener has been the chancellor of Asian Theological Seminary in Manila, the Philippines, since 2011. He is also a professor with a PhD in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary in California, USA. Dr. Gener has taught at ATS since 2002 and has served ATS in many leadership roles.