

Celebrating the Centennial of Ashland Theological Seminary

By Dale R. Stoffer*

On September 11, 1906, a new chapter began in the story of theological education at Ashland Theological Seminary. Though occasional courses had been offered in theology since the latter 1880s and a theological course of study had appeared in 1895, the beginning of the seminary is generally dated as 1906. The reasons for this are that prior to 1906 there were very few resources, either financial or personnel, that were dedicated to theological training and there were relatively few students in the theological department. In 1906 J. Allen Miller, who had served as the president of Ashland College since 1899, resigned in order to turn his full attention to his first academic love: theological education. He was the dean of the Theological Department from 1906 until 1933. In 1913 the theological program at Ashland College was for the first time designated a seminary. Until 1930 the seminary remained essentially a Bible Department of the college. However, in 1930 the seminary became the first graduate division of the college.

The fortunes of the Brethren Church and of Ashland College and Seminary were closely tied from the 1880s through the 1940s. For both, these years included financial and leadership crises during the late 1800s, a period of growth under capable leadership between 1900 and the late 1920s, and then controversy during the 1930s that resulted in a division in 1939 between the "Ashland" Brethren, the supporters of Ashland College and Seminary, and the "Grace" Brethren, the supporters of Grace Theological Seminary, founded in 1937. A key figure in this controversy from the Grace Brethren side was Alva J. McClain, who had replaced J. Allen Miller as the dean of the seminary in 1933. He was eventually dismissed by the Ashland College trustees in 1937 and then helped form Grace Theological Seminary.

Ashland Theological Seminary, as a result of this division and other factors, struggled to survive throughout the 1940s and 50s. The deans of the seminary during these difficult years were Willis Ronk, Melvin Stuckey, and Delbert Flora. Throughout most of this period there were only three or four faculty members and less than twenty students. There were frank discussions at the college and in the Brethren Church about the closure of the seminary. However, college president Glenn L. Clayton and seminary dean Delbert Flora felt that the seminary was needed in order to provide trained leadership for the Brethren Church. But this meant that significant advances needed to occur in all areas of the seminary's life. Under the leadership of Joseph R. Shultz, who became dean in 1963, the seminary began a bold venture of expansion that included accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools in 1969. This dramatic transformation featured the opening of extensions, the development of counseling programs, the recruitment of students from a wide variety of denominations, and catering to non-traditional students.

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These initiatives enabled the seminary to grow from 22 students in 1963, to over 100 students in the early 1970s, and over 400 students by the early 1980s.

In 1982 Fred Finks followed Shultz as vice-president and later president of the seminary. He guided the school to continued growth; in the 2006 academic year the seminary reached 894 students. The number of faculty has grown apace, from five faculty in 1964 to twenty-one full-time faculty in 2006. Over half of the student body is now women; about one-third is African-American; and about one-third is found in extensions in Cleveland, Columbus, and Detroit. Since the 1960s international students have added to the diversity and enrichment of the seminary community. The seminary has also partnered with the Brethren Church in bringing theological training to the Argentine Brethren Church and other mission sites in South America through the South American Theological Seminary in Colon, Argentina. In 2006 Finks transitioned to the presidency of Ashland University and John Shultz became the eighth president of Ashland Theological Seminary.

From 1922 until 1958 Ashland Theological Seminary met on the campus of Ashland College (now designated Ashland University) in Miller Hall. In 1958 the seminary moved to the former John C. Myers estate on Center Street in Ashland. Since then a number of additional properties have been acquired and new facilities have been built: the library was expanded in 1965, with further additions in 1976 and 1991; seminary student housing was built in 1970; the Ronk Memorial Chapel in 1975; the Shultz Academic Center in 1989; the Gerber Academic Center in 1997; and the Sandberg Leadership Center in 2001.

The centennial year has offered the seminary community the opportunity to celebrate its remarkable history in a number of ways. During the centennial year of 2006 the following festivities have occurred: a Centennial Dinner on January 20, with guest speaker Charles Munson and the viewing of a historical video; Great Commission Week, February 6-10, featuring two outstanding international graduates of the seminary, Prasanth Kumar and Radu Tirle; two trips to Israel in March; the Spring Ministries Conference, April 3-5, with Tony Evans, Bill Hybels, and Knute Larson as the special speakers; the commencement service on June 3 at which Fred Finks spoke; a concert by New Song on July 19 during the week of the Brethren General Conference; a Founders' Day Weekend, September 9-10 (classes began on September 11, 1906) including a Saturday picnic and Sunday worship with Detroit alumnus Ed Branch; and the Fall Lecture Series with Randall Balmer as the special speaker (his lectures are featured in this journal). Two other features of the centennial year were the publication of an *Ashland Theological Seminary Centennial Cookbook* and the preparation of a history of the seminary.

As part of the celebrations on Founders' Day Weekend, the seminary community dedicated a Wall of Remembrance on September 10, 2006. The granite wall featured the names of all the faculty and administrators at the seminary during the century of its existence; a separate plaque also listed all the present employees of the seminary. The dedication service offered an exceptional opportunity to look backward with gratitude to the Lord for his grace and to the many who have served so faithfully and so sacrificially; to look at the present with wonder at the personal, physical, and financial resources with which God has blessed the seminary; and to