

Go With The Gospel

Missionary statesman E. Stanley Jones was an exceptional figure in history, so much so that Asbury Theological Seminary () named its missions school after him. Attracting students from around the world, the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism honors him as one who answered God's call and used his many gifts to serve.

"Before somebody like a Billy Graham, there was a Stanley Jones," said Dr. Gregg Okesson, dean of the school that bears Jones' name. "He arguably could be one of the most influential, best-known missionaries. He was a missionary to India and had an incredible career contextualizing the gospel in India. He was an evangelist. He traveled all around the world, six continents. He was a friend of Mahatma Gandhi and other dignitaries around the world and played a really strong peacekeeping role in the world, so he really was just an incredible scholar, evangelist and statesman."

Dean Okesson also sees Jones as "a fascinating case study" in part because Jones spent his whole career in India ministering to higher-caste people.

"His passion was to reach the higher-caste people," Okesson says. "There was a lot of ministry at the time among the Dalits and lower caste, and yet he was challenged by some higher castes to have a ministry program, and he was an intellectual himself as a scholarly person."

In Jones, the students at the school have an example to look to as one who believed in being a long-term presence in a foreign land, making the gospel of Jesus Christ real to the people and to achieve spiritual "breakthrough" among them.

The effective missionary knows that "to preach the gospel, you need to live the gospel, and you need to dialogue with people and listen to them," Okesson says. "But he also spent

certainly half of his life traveling all around the world. He was an evangelist, and sometimes he would preach five times a day in different contexts. He's an incredible preacher. And so he would also be representative of those who really wanted to constantly be preaching Christ where He had not been preached. So I think he's a great and a true evangelist in the likes of your Billy Grahams and others, but also somebody who really gave his entire life for India. His book *The Christ of the Indian Road* is one of the most significant books I think I've ever read. It shows deep contextualization, really wanting to show how Christianity is not just this Western religion, but what Christianity looks like in the new context."

Diverse Learning Environment

Asbury Seminary has about 1,700 students in total with the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism one of several schools within the seminary.

"We've seen six or seven years of steady growth as an institution," Okesson says, noting that many institutions of higher learning are struggling to maintain or grow their student body. "[The ESJ School] probably has anywhere between 100 and 150 students."

The school is also the most diverse within the seminary.

"We have a lot of international students, a lot of minority students, and so it's really a fun context," the dean says.

Okesson has been with Asbury Seminary for a decade, nine of those years as dean at E. Stanley Jones, but initially, he wasn't sure he wanted to move from East Africa, where he and his family served as missionaries, to Wilmore, Kentucky, where the seminary is located.

"One of my concerns was living in Kentucky and not being surrounded by the nations," Okesson says, but he learned his worries were unfounded. "Wilmore, Kentucky, is really a

fascinating place with incredible diversity. We have an opportunity to teach incredible men and women from all around the world.”

Some of the school’s alumni have scattered around the world in their ministries. Some are well known, others not.

João Carlos Lopes is a bishop with the Methodist Church of Brazil who is “leading just an incredible renewal and a movement of church planting in Brazil,” says Okesson, who noted that many other alumni are leaders of institutions.

That is also the case with one particular graduate, the great-great-great-grandson of Hudson Taylor, the 19th-century British missionary to China. Taylor’s descendant is leading an institution in Taiwan. Another alumnus is president of one of the key seminaries in India. Some other alumni are professors at prestigious seminaries in North America and abroad.

“They are leaders of faith-based nongovernmental organizations both here in the U.S. and abroad,” Okesson says. “Ajith Fernando would be another well-known name in Christian circles.”

But most importantly in God’s economy are those alumni who are simple “faithful missionaries,” Okesson says. Ultimately, “our greatest hopes and dreams would be faithfulness, faithful presence, that as the Holy Spirit goes before them, that He would lead them into that kind of deep incarnational, faithful presence that allows for a deep gospel witness in an area.”

The school feels the weight of the responsibility to prepare its students for such long and faithful service wherever God leads them, in the U.S. or to far-flung fields.

“It’s just this incredible, humbling responsibility because our school has trained such incredible men and women, church planters all throughout the United States, and sees the incredible influence they’re having.”

Okesson also believes in learning from the school's alumni.

"It's really world-class training that I get with people who have had such an incredible experience of being immersed in missions themselves," he says.

The school is purposeful about continuing to engage its graduates.

"We really try and keep a very strong connection with our alumni because they're the ones living it every day of their lives," he says. "What can we as an institution learn from them? So we regularly bring our alumni back and provide opportunities to listen to them. What do we need to learn? What areas do we need to emphasize? Allowing our alumni to feed back into how we do our missiological training at the institution is important.

"We've put a lot of emphasis recently on church planting and want to be a part of church-planting movements all around the world," Okesson says. "We often talk about wanting to grow fruit on other people's trees. What role can a Western seminary have in terms of coming alongside and listening and loving and serving what God is doing in the power of the Holy Spirit all around the world?"

Polycentric Missions Movement

E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism prepares its students well in many ways, including academically.

"We have a Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies, which is one of the premier Ph.D. programs in missiology in the whole world," the dean says. "We also have a master's of Intercultural Studies, which is where we're teaching missiology, and we have a master's in Intercultural Studies focused specifically on church plants, that allows people to study without moving to Wilmore, Kentucky. So if anybody wants to be a part of this

training, we develop it through hybrid education and it's cohort based so they learn with other students in a cohort over a three-year period of time. And they never need to move to Wilmore, Kentucky. They come once a year. We really want to keep them in their contexts. We really want to learn from what they're experiencing."

Okesson sees missiology as really significant in this era.

"It's always integrative or a multidisciplinary field, so it's really exciting," he says. "It gets us into a lot of fascinating topics like evangelism and discipleship. Church planting would be a big focus of ours. But it also gets us into issues of international development and dealing with complex things such as poverty. It focuses on textual theology, the growth of world Christianity and understanding how Christianity is emerging and its contributions, and takes us into the migration, the movement of people and a field we call diaspora theology, certainly of ethnicity, race and the church, which are critical especially right now, as well as larger public issues, public theology, public missiology. I don't know that it's ever been as exciting and important a time to actually focus on missiologists as right now."

The church has matured so much in Africa, for instance, that they can now see the need to send missionaries to an increasingly secular United States.

"It used to be from the West to the rest, a movement of missions from the U.K. or from North America to the rest of the world," he says. "Now what we're really seeing is what we call polycentric missions, everywhere to everywhere. We're certainly seeing Africans and Latin Americans and Asians coming to the West as missionaries, and our job is to work with them. In fact, in many areas, churches that are growing the fastest in the United States right now are churches that are founded by people who originally lived outside of the United States."

An often-lukewarm American church is the beneficiary of the spiritual fervor of the church in these sending nations.

“We’re seeing a huge need for missiological energy being given back to churches that are heavily secularized,” the dean says. “We talk about a post-Christian context in the West. Somebody like Lesslie Newbigin, a well-known missiologist, would really be somebody who has captivated our attention to say, well, with all the energy that we have given historically to thinking of mission around the world, we need to give that same energy to very Western and increasingly secular post-Christian contexts. It’s really not an either-or situation, but I think that’s what makes polycentric missions so exciting. Really we need to give evangelistic church planting this theological energy in all contexts. With the migration in the movement of people, it’s really an exciting day to do that.”

Dean Okesson and Asbury Theological Seminary’s E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism lead the way in world missions and evangelism, challenging evangelists, church planters and missionaries in all contexts around the world to learn from and edify each other as led by the Spirit for the glory of God.

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