Training and educating Pentecostal Christians for life and service has been an integral part of the Assemblies of God (AG) since its organization in 1914. The call for the first General Council included this declaration: “We may have a proposition to lay before the body of a general Bible training school with a literary department for our people.”¹ A subsequent announcement restated this purpose as follows: “As Jesus commanded in the great commission, that the Gospel should be taught, preached and published in all the world before His return, we should consider the Ministerial, School and Publishing interests, to the glory of God, that Jesus may be with us even unto the end of the world.”² In the decades following that meeting, the AG has been a leader in establishing a variety of educational institutions for training and equipping its constituents for life and service in the church.

The Emergence of Pentecostal Bible Schools, 1900-1920

Although no plan for a Bible training school emerged from the 1914 General Council, delegates did endorse the Gospel School in Findlay, Ohio, operated by Thomas King Leonard (1861-1946). This school, like many others of its time, consisted of short-term studies offered in just twenty-one weeks, October to April. Furthermore, the council recommended “students in other localities avail themselves of the courses offered in other Full Gospel or Pentecostal schools within their reach, and avail themselves of all opportunities for the study of the Word.”³ While the council did not identify those schools by name or location, no less than ten schools then in existence had embraced the Pentecostal message.⁴

Over the next eight years, the General Council endorsed six other schools. Included in that number were: Mount Tabor Bible Training School (Chicago, Illinois);³ Pacific Bible and Missionary Training School (San Francisco, California);⁵ Beulah Heights Bible School (North Bergen, New Jersey);⁷ Rochester Bible Training School (Rochester, New York); Bethel Bible Institute (Newark, New Jersey);⁸ and Southern California Bible Institute (Los Angeles, California).⁹

Many Pentecostals had enthusiastically adopted the “Itinerary Bible School” model (short-term classes lasting a few weeks), particularly in the decade from 1910-1919. Daniel Charles Owen Opperman¹⁰ (1872-1926) was the leading sponsor of these short-term Bible schools, hosting numerous schools in Alabama, Arkansas, Iowa, Missouri, and Texas.¹¹ Opperman’s educational philosophy was simple; he taught his students “how to pray, how to study God’s Word, how to know the Lord and walk with Him.”¹²

Despite the relative success of these Bible Schools, the first generation of Pentecostal Christians recognized the need for more permanent and structured training schools for its members and adherents. This realization soon led to the establishment of schools owned and operated by various Pentecostal denominations.

The Formation of Permanent Bible Schools, 1920-1945

The privately owned and operated Bible schools, graduating several dozen students per year, simply could not...
meet the swelling need for educated and equipped workers. In the fall of 1920, the first school operated by the General Council opened its doors — Midwest Bible School in Auburn, Nebraska. The school closed after one year due to financial difficulties and a shortage of teachers and staff.  

In 1922, the General Council authorized the establishment of Central Bible Institute (CBI) in Springfield, Missouri. Led by Daniel Warren Kerr (1856-1927), Frank M. Boyd (1883-1984) and William Irvin Evans (1887-1954), the school developed a three-year diploma program. By 1939 student enrollment had reached 438 and the school was sending out more than 100 graduates each year.  

Many other Pentecostal Bible schools struggled for survival over the next twenty-five years. There were at least two inter-related causes for their life-threatening condition. First, there was an uncontrolled proliferation of Bible schools after World War I. Through the leadership of visionary individuals and local churches, some eighteen Bible schools were established within the AG and at least another twenty-seven Bible schools were founded by other Pentecostal denominations. Second, the Great Depression of the 1930s placed a financial hardship on the entire nation, and Pentecostal Christians, already at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, found it especially difficult to sustain their Bible schools. “Our present Bible schools,” observed P. C. Nelson, president of Southwestern Bible School, “were built from small donations.”  

These schools found themselves in competition with each other for student enrollment, financial support and resources necessary to secure their futures. The combined weight of these external forces resulted in the closure or merger of more than a dozen AG Bible schools by 1945.  

The Development of Liberal Arts Education, 1945-1965  

The end of World War II led to a flurry of activity within AG Bible institutes. They expanded their curriculum, offered various bachelor’s degrees and sought accreditation.  

Expanded Curriculum  

As early as 1934, P. C. Nelson, president of Southwestern Bible School called for new courses in the curriculum that would prepare students for careers in education, music, business, engineering, architecture, and the industrial arts. North Central Bible Institute opened a two-year Business College in 1938, while Southwestern Bible Institute, after its name change and move to Waxahachie, Texas, added a junior college in 1944.  

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Northwest Bible Institute did the same in 1955, citing the need to satisfy the increasing demands for liberal arts training “in a Pentecostal environment” as its motivation. Several AG Bible schools began extending their programs by adding a fourth year of coursework and offered various bachelor degrees: Southern California Bible College (1939); Northwest Bible Institute (1947); Central Bible Institute (1948); Southwestern Bible Institute (1950); Bethany Bible Institute (1954); and North Central Bible Institute (1956).

Two schools added a fifth year of coursework resulting in graduate degrees: Central Bible Institute (1949) and Southwestern Bible Institute (1950).

Concurrent with these curricular modifications by the Bible schools was a move in the late 1940s and early 1950s on the part of the General Council to establish a Pentecostal liberal arts college. In the fall of 1955, Evangel College opened for classes amid some controversy over the role of liberal arts education within a spirit-filled community of believers. To safeguard the Bible institute’s role as the center for ministerial and missionary training, Evangel College was limited to offering just 22 credits of Bible and theology.

Accreditation

Assemblies of God schools sought accreditation, in part, because the provisions of the GI Bill — federal funding for tuition, textbooks, fees and academic services for veterans — were only available at accredited...
Since none of the country’s Bible schools were accredited, a series of discussions were held that led to the founding of the Accrediting Association of Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges (AABC) in 1947. Central Bible Institute, Glad Tidings Bible Institute, Metropolitan Bible Institute, North Central Bible Institute, South-Eastern Bible Institute, Southern California Bible College, and Southwestern Bible Institute became charter members in 1948.

As the baby boomers were coming of age, the Pentecostal Bible school movement experienced a startling metamorphosis. The traditional Bible-based curriculum gave way to increased general education courses and new majors in business, elementary education, music and psychology appeared. Gradually, the four-year bachelor’s degree replaced the three-year diploma. Professional accreditation through the AABC soon yielded to regional accreditation; as a result, several schools abandoned their historic Bible school identity and embraced new identities as four-year liberal arts colleges. It is doubtful that any Pentecostal educators of the early 1960s were listening to Bob Dylan. Nevertheless, he was right — “the times they [were] a-changin’.”

The Creation of the Comprehensive Universities, 1960-Present

Assemblies of God higher education in the last fifty years, with some exceptions, moved away from the Bible school model and embraced the comprehensive university model.

During the 1960s, several AG Bible schools sought regional accreditation for their programs. These decisions brought additional pressure upon the schools to broaden their curriculum in general education and introduce additional non-ministry majors. Southwestern Bible Institute sought regional accreditation in 1960. Southern California Bible College and Bethany Bible College followed suit in 1964 and 1966 respectively. Southern California dropped the word Bible from its name at that time, and three years later, gained an endorsement from the California Department of Education for its elementary education program.

As the Bible schools sought and received regional accreditation, they severed their accreditation connections with the American Association of Bible Colleges. These schools reduced the required number of required Bible and theology credits by more than one-third, thus making room in their curriculum for expanded non-ministry course offerings. The AABC standard had been 30 credits of Bible and theology in all majors; the AG lowered its standard to only 18 credits of Bible and theology for all non-ministry majors.

As the number of non-ministry majors grew, specialized accreditation was required for programs in elementary and secondary education, nursing, and social work. Several schools

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added graduate majors in ministry and other areas of professional training including business, counseling, education, and psychology. Finally, seven Bible schools changed their names; six by adding the word “university” and seven by deleting the word “Bible,” thus confirming that they were, indeed, no longer Bible schools.31

Other schools have chosen to maintain their primary focus on ministerial training. These schools — the largest of which are Central Bible College, Trinity Bible College, and Zion Bible College — continue their strong emphasis on spiritual and ministerial education.

In 1961, the General Council authorized the establishment of a graduate school of theology, and this became a reality under the leadership of Cordas C. Burnett (1917-1975).32 The first students were enrolled in 1973. Today, the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (AGTS) offers numerous graduate and doctoral degrees in divinity, ministry and missions.33 In January 2011, the boards of directors of AGTS, Central Bible College, and Evangel University unanimously adopted a resolution agreeing to work toward consolidation of the three resident schools in Springfield, Missouri, for the purpose of strengthening the overall academic offerings and the financial base of the schools.34

The Rebirth of Practical Ministry Training

In 2003, the General Council of the AG recognized the role of several types of short-term training programs. It passed a resolution broadening the Commission on Christian Higher Education’s statement of purpose enabling it to become “a resource and provide partnership opportunities for other ministerial training institutions, including church-based Bible institutes, Master’s Commissions, non-traditional educational systems, and other entities providing ministerial training.”35 This resolution provides ample evidence that training and preparation for ministry and lay service in the AG has come full circle; once again, short-term programs of discipleship and training are seen as valuable and significant options for many persons seeking an alternative to four years of collegiate training.

The best known of these “other ministerial training institutions” is the Master’s Commission (MC) program. Founded in 1984 through the efforts of First Assembly of God (Phoenix, Arizona), Master’s Commission affords young adults an eight-month immersion experience in Christian discipleship, spiritual formation,
Scripture memorization, practical ministry training, music, evangelism and missionary outreach. In 2009, AG churches reported more than 352 Master’s Commissions were operating in nearly every state with an enrollment that exceeded 2,000 participants.

Another program of short-term ministry training are the “church-based Bible institutes” (CBBI). These training centers, often located in larger congregations, provide students an opportunity to learn under the tutelage of the pastoral staff. Students develop their ministry skills by putting their training into practice within the local church. In 2009, the AG reported the existence of 1,416 CBBIs that trained 14,510 students.

A third ministry training program has emerged within the past ten years. Twenty-four districts, enrolling over 3,400 students, have established “Schools of Ministry” (DSOM) to provide clergy training resulting in the issuance of ministry credentials within one year.

Typically, DSOM classes are conducted one weekend per month (a minimum of five hours) for nine months. Students also complete various levels of independent study, readings, written assignments, and testing. Proctored by the district staff and selected pastors from across the state, this training program “seeks to integrate spiritual formation, relational learning, and academic achievement and provide a unique learning experience. Students will not only meet the educational requirements for obtaining ministerial credentials but are encouraged to develop the character and skill essential for effective ministry.”

In many respects, these nontraditional approaches to ministry preparation are reminiscent of the Bible and missionary training schools existing during the earliest days of the Pentecostal revival.

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Specialized Training for Specific People Groups

Some educators recognized the need for Bible school training tailored to specific ethnic populations. Alice E. Luce (1873-1955) established the Berean Bible Institute in October 1926, in San Diego, California to offer Bible courses and missions training in Spanish so that Hispanics might receive training to minister among their people in the American Southwest and throughout Latin America. She developed curriculum, wrote several books and numerous articles. Luce’s school, now known as Latin American Bible Institute, is located in La Puente, California and continues its educational mission.

A contemporary of Luce was Henry C. Ball (1896-1989) who founded the Latin American Bible Institute in San Antonio, Texas in November 1926. As a result of these groundbreaking efforts, other Spanish language Bible schools have been founded in Texas, California, New York, Florida, and Puerto Rico.

The population of Native Americans has not been ignored as Bible schools have been formed to meet their specific spiritual and educational needs and interests. In 1957, Alta Mary Washburn (1906-1990) established the All Tribes Bible School in Phoenix, Arizona. Known today as American Indian College, it is the only regionally accredited, evangelical college serving Native American students. One other post-
secondary institution serving Native Americans was founded in 1968 by Pauline Mastries, Charles Hadden, and Hubert Boese as Eastern Indian Bible Institute. The current name is Native American Bible College at Shannon, North Carolina. Finally, several AG schools have been forerunners in providing education for students with hearing impairments. In 1969, North Central University launched the Carlsstrom Deaf Studies program, which is currently the “only fully self-contained degree granting program for the deaf among AG institutions.” Central Bible College and Zion Bible College also provide educational opportunities for persons within the deaf community.

Advances in Distance Education

Assemblies of God educators have long recognized the difficulties of attending residential colleges. Consequently, they have offered a variety of distance education options, including correspondence courses, extension sites, and online degree programs.

Correspondence Courses

As early as 1914, a series of “Home Bible Studies” were made available from the Gospel Publishing House, founded by T. K. Leonard, superintendent of The Gospel School. These studies of the entire Bible could be completed in one year. In 1926, Central Bible Institute offered a series of seven courses on the Old Testament, New Testament, Dispensational Studies, Prophecy, Life of Christ, Pauline Epistles, and Evangelism. Each course could be completed in eight to twenty-four months and cost between $6.00 and $12.00. In 1947, Southwestern Bible Institute made its Spanish and French language courses available for correspondence students. The following year, the General Council announced the establishment of a Correspondence School, under the direction of Frank M. Boyd, called the Berean School of the Bible. Over the next fifty years more than 40,000 students enrolled in these courses. This correspondence school eventually began offering college credit courses and was renamed Berean College and then Berean University. In 1999, Berean University merged with the International Correspondence Institute (ICI) to form Global University. At various times in their history, several AG universities have also offered correspondence courses, including North Central University, Southeastern University, and Southwestern Assemblies of God University.

Extension Sites

Recognizing the limitations of correspondence education, Central Bible Institute established an extension program in Detroit, Michigan in 1962 offering classroom instruction leading to the Associate of Arts degree. Central Bible College also has extension sites at Grand Rapids, Michigan and Ozark, Missouri (James River Leadership College). Other CBC extension sites were briefly operated in Memphis, Tennessee; Denver, Colorado; and Little Rock, Arkansas. Presently, two institutions have extension campuses that offer associate and bachelor’s degrees: Northwest University in Salem, Oregon and Valley Forge Christian College in Woodbridge, Virginia. Graduate education is offered by the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary on eight branch campuses.

Online Education

Recent advances in technology make it possible for students to take courses online.
to earn a college degree by studying via the internet. Using software such as Blackboard, eCollege, Angel and similar programs, students can view classroom lectures, participate in discussion boards, conduct research, access library holdings and submit assignments. Various degree programs may be earned online at Bethany University, Central Bible College, Southeastern University, Southwestern Assemblies of God University, Trinity Bible College, and Valley Forge Christian College. Global University also offers college courses online which include a digital library of resources.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of Pentecostal higher education, D. W. Kerr wrote in 1922, is “to cause people to get God’s viewpoint of things and to impart the same to others. In other words, [an Assemblies of God school] may be defined as a place where one may learn to think, speak, live, work and die scripturally.” The AG presently endorses nineteen institutions of higher education, with a combined enrollment of 16,277 students in the fall of 2009.

The story of AG higher education is one of visionary, entrepreneurial, Spirit-filled educators who have raised up in each new generation, Pentecostal leaders for the church, community and the world. The lasting testimony to their faith and commitment to education can be found in the institutions they established.

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**NOTES**

17. Ibid.
22. For a complete description of the events surrounding the founding of Evangel College, including the role of the Bible school presidents, see Barry H. Corey, “Pentecostalism and the Collegiate Institution: A Study in the Decision to found Evangel College” (Ph.D. dissertation,


Today this agency is known as the Association for Biblical Higher Education.


Bob Dylan, “The Times They Are a-Changin.” Copyright 1963; renewed 1991 Special Rider


Among the nine largest and oldest Bible schools – Bethany, Central, North Central, Northwest, Southeastern, Southwestern, Trinity, Valley Forge, and Vanguard – only Central Bible College and Trinity have retained accreditation with both the Association of Biblical Higher Education and its regional accreditation association.

There are a few exceptions. Central Bible College and North Central University retain a 30-credit Bible core for all majors.

The Alliance for Assemblies of God Higher Education (AAGHE) is an agency established by the General Council “for the purpose of reviewing, evaluating, and endorsing Assemblies of God institutions of higher learning at the institute, baccalaureate, and graduate level. The endorsement process is intended to facilitate the development of educational institutions that are committed to the mission of the Church, the integration of faith and learning in the Pentecostal tradition, and academic excellence.” See “The Alliance for AG Higher Education, Endorsement Criteria and Procedural Manual,” (Springfield, MO: General Council of the Assemblies of God, 2005), 1.

These historic Assemblies of God Bible colleges have so changed their names: Bethany, Eastern (Valley Forge Christian College, not University), North Central, Northwest, Southeastern, Southern California (Vanguard), and Southwestern. North Central University, however, continues to require 30 credits of Bible and theology for all students, regardless of their major.


“National Profile Church Data for Calendar Year 2009,” All Church Ministries Report #750 (Springfield, MO: General Council of the Assemblies of God, 2010).

Ibid.


Alice Luce, “Bible School Opens at San Diego,” Pentecostal Evangel, November 13, 1926, 4.


Good Shepherd Indian Bible Institute in Mobridge, South Dakota was founded in 1970 by Leo and Mildred Bankson (later renamed Central Indian Bible College and then Black Hills Indian Bible College in Rapid City, South Dakota). Its successor is the Institute for Ministry Development, an intercultural distance-education program for Native Americans. Far North Bible College in Anchorage, Alaska was established in 1962 through the efforts of Arvin and Luana Glandon along with Kenneth Andrus. This school closed in 2009 and became the Alaska District School of Ministry.


General Council Minutes, April 1914, 14-15.


“Language Instruction By Mail,” Pentecostal Evangel, August 9, 1947, 15.

“Your Correspondence School,” Pentecostal Evangel, September 4, 1948, 11.


