

**AN ADDRESS BY THE FOUNDER AND ACTING PROVOST, REV. DR.  
GARY S. MAXEY, ON THE OCCASION OF THE EIGHTEENTH  
GRADUATION CEREMONY OF WEST AFRICA THEOLOGICAL  
SEMINARY, SATURDAY, 24 MAY 2008**

Our Special Guest of Honor, His Excellency, the Vice President of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan,

Our Guest Speaker, Most Rev. S. Kehinde Stephen, Archbishop of Ibadan, Methodist Church Nigeria,

Dr. C. O. T. Ugwu, Head of Religion Department, the University of Nigeria Nsukka,

Distinguished Guests visiting us on this occasion from the United States of America,

Members of the Governing Council of West Africa Theological Seminary,

Members of the Administrative Council of West Africa Theological Seminary,

Members of the WATS faculty and staff,

My Dear Graduands and Matriculants,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great joy to welcome you all to the Eighteenth Annual Graduation Convocation of West Africa Theological Seminary, this year combined with several other notable events, and celebrated once again on our permanent property. We are thankful to God that we are celebrating the completion of more than two years on this wonderful new campus in Lagos. As we do so we look back on another year of great progress in our task of training quality leadership for the Church in Africa.

This year we are especially honored to have with us some special guests from the USA. For the past two weeks we have enjoyed the love and labors of Dr. and Mrs. Ira Pence and their granddaughter, from the state of Georgia. Dr. Pence is a retired engineer. In coming to WATS he has shown us all what it means to be a servant, as he and his family have both funded and built with their own hands great additions to this campus. They are examples of the increasing scores of USA team

members who are blessing us these days with their medical expertise, their construction and remodeling skills, their evangelistic fervor and other capabilities. Thank you, Dr. and Mrs. Pence, and Celeste, for being with us today!

With us also is Eric Rochester, the missions leader of Heartland Community Church in Overland Park, Kansas. Eric is no stranger to WATS, and represents several mission teams who have already come to us from Heartland, as well as their generosity in providing to date \$59,024 for the construction of our four-story Africa Center for Urban and Wholistic Ministries, for which today we are celebrating the groundbreaking. Thank you, Eric for being with us today on this historic occasion!

We also are pleased to welcome two very special couples who are in Nigeria for the first time: Bruce and Dee Richardson, of Greenwood, Indiana, and David and Jewel Byrd, of Phoenix, Arizona. Bruce Richardson is the president of Facilitators International, which is an organization established by the late Dr. Charlie Spicer—a long-time friend of WATS—especially devoted to the funding of scholarships for theological education. Bruce and Dee have worked tirelessly to encourage and support WATS for the past three years or more. David and Jewel Byrd are new and wonderful friends who are with us today representing other members of their family, which has so generously donated to WATS the incredible ancient Bible and Christian book collection we have been hearing about and which we are all going to see with our own eyes for the first time today. Thank you, Bruce and Dee and David and Jewel, for coming to be with us today!

The list of overseas guests is not complete without mentioning the name of Dr. William Sillings, who is here today on his sixth or seventh visit to WATS. He comes to us again as the chairman of the US-based organization that has done more than any other to provide support for this institution: Friends of West Africa Theological Seminary, now based in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Thank you, Dr. Sillings, for being with us once again, even as we look forward to your return visit in the month of August to once again teach one of our Masters modules. I cannot refrain from noting that Dr. Sillings and I met each other for the first time exactly twenty years ago today. The reason he and I both remember that date—May 24, 1988—is that on that day we celebrated together the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conversion of John Wesley, which took place on May 24, 1738. And of course that means that today is the 270<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wesley's conversion. Frankly, as children of the Methodist heritage both Dr. Sillings and I would not be here were it not for that very remarkable event on Aldersgate Street in London 270 years ago today, to a thirty-five-year-old Anglican priest who had lived the most disciplined Christian life possible and had even sailed to America in vain seeking to find salvation through service, but who had discovered that apart from a personal

evangelical conversion none of that was adequate to make him fit for heaven. Perhaps this is one more reminder to us here at WATS that even if we have dropped the word “Wesley” from our name we cannot deny our spiritual heritage.

Today, of course, we are here to celebrate with the 100+ graduating students who are before us. We are proud of all of them. As usual, they are from the various WATS academic programs, including both undergraduate and graduate students. And this year we are particularly blessed to have with us graduating students from our satellite campus in Owerri, Imo State, where this seminary was birthed nineteen years ago. This should be a visible reminder to us that when one steps onto the WATS campus here in Ipaja, Lagos, one is not seeing the whole picture. Not only do we have WATS students who are pursuing excellence in Lagos and 400 miles away in eastern Nigeria, but for nearly ten years we have had WATS students graduating every year in Kenya and Uganda, under the partnership we established in the 1990s with International Christian Ministries, based in Bakersfield, California.

I must also point out that for the first time we are also graduating a significant number of students from our Lagos in-service program here at WATS. These are students who come to this campus faithfully on Fridays and Saturdays for intensive week-end studies. Today, I wish to most warmly congratulate both them and the other graduating students who are sitting before us.

It is a further great blessing that today we are symbolically breaking ground for not one but two new buildings on this campus. Phase Two of our campus development is already underway, as we can see from the recent erection of our tool building through the generosity and help of the Pence family. But the center piece of this second phase is the building of the first of three four-story buildings: The Africa Center for Urban and Wholistic Ministries. Today we will symbolically break ground for this building, and also for our new chapel building, which will be constructed to handle up to 1,000 people and which will eventually be made into a multi-story building.

The four-story Africa Center for Urban and Wholistic Ministries—which will be located approximately where I am standing to make this address—will provide the basic capacity for WATS to boost its student enrollment by another 35%. This is a large building, measuring 50 meters in length. The ground floor will be entirely set aside for our expanded WATS clinic, including a 16-bed hospital. The future vision is that the hospital can eventually expand to cover two floors of the building. In the meantime, though, the remainder of the building will be set aside for offices, classroom space, a mission resource center, and our exciting Bible Room, which

will house the fabulous collection of ancient Bibles and rare Christian books which we are receiving today.

On behalf of all of us here today, and on behalf of the entire WATS community around the world, I do wish to express our deepest gratitude to David and Jewel Byrd for coming all the way from Phoenix, Arizona, to present the Bible collection on behalf of their family. I will not take time here to detail what we are receiving, because I know David Byrd will do an excellent job of that later in the program. However, I must say that when I first learned of this donation I was very stunned and very excited. But it was when I finally actually saw the Bibles and books that I fully realized how privileged we are. WATS is an institution that has prided itself first and foremost in being a BIBLE school, where we take the Sacred Scriptures—both the Old and the New Testaments—very seriously. I believe WATS can provide a good housing for these treasures that remind us that the Word of God has come down to us in translation through the very laborious efforts of great people of God stretching back through the centuries. To hold in my own hands a treasure sure as Desiderius Erasmus' 1519 Greek and Latin New Testament and to know that it has survived nearly 500 years and is now here on African soil is indeed a thrilling thing.

If you have looked at the program already you will know that in addition to these things we are also today inaugurating our first endowed faculty chair at WATS. Thanks to the generosity of some former US missionaries to Nigeria, we are today presenting the first occupant of the Earl and Mabel Hunter Muslim Ministry Chair. We hope and pray that this will be the first of many other such endowed faculty chairs in the future.

Today we have made more serious preparations for celebration than perhaps at any time in our past. But I also want to believe that even greater things are coming in the future. Today we are breaking ground for new buildings, and I believe that one year from now we can gather again to dedicate those buildings to the Lord. And that also reminds me that today we are at least in an informal way kicking off the twentieth year of our history, which will culminate on May 23, 2009, in a grand celebration of our twentieth anniversary as an institution. Surely we have much to look forward to on that day!

As the Founder and currently the Acting Provost of West Africa Theological Seminary, I want to publicly thank God for His unceasing grace and sustaining hand across these past nineteen years. WATS has been through some very challenging times, and we have learned that progress has sometimes been on a pattern of two-steps-forward-and-one-back, or at least we have learned that we cannot move forward without occasional serious challenges to our faith and our

loyalty. Yet through all of the tough times I give glory to God that our people—both staff and students—have remained faithful and hard-working, and that no matter what the contrary winds have been we have steadily continued to do the very thing for which this institution was founded in 1989: the training of high-quality leadership for the Church in Africa.

Our graduates today are serving all over Nigeria and all throughout the African continent—from Pretoria, South Africa, to The Gambia to Nairobi, Kenya. They are serving in North America, Europe, Asia and elsewhere on the globe. And I have discovered that again and again they are serving with the highest of integrity and productivity and are often a cut above other leaders around them. Just one week ago I had the honor of speaking five times at the first anniversary celebrations of a dynamic church pastored in Antwerp, Belgium, by Simon Khan, one of our Cameroonian undergraduate and Masters graduates. Simon is humbly doing a stellar job in a city where numerous other African pastors are making a mockery of the Gospel by focusing on money and personal advantage and preaching a very truncated Gospel. In one year Simon has not only raised up a viable church in Belgium, but their missionary zeal has led them to establish satellite branches in Yaunde, Cameroon and Calcutta, India.

In The Gambia, WATS graduate David Jatta continues week after week to effectively win and disciple converts to Christ in a country that is 87% Muslim. Another of our Masters graduates who should have been with us today, also as a member of our Governing Council, Rev. Cosmas Ilechukwu, is unavoidably absent to attend his own graduation from the Doctor of Ministry program at Bakke Graduate University. I am thankful for and proud of these and many other wonderful WATS products who are making a great difference for God around the world.

And . . . as I look ahead over the coming year . . . I must also thank God for our own teaching faculty members who are soon scheduled to be back with us after spending the past few years preparing for greater things to come. Dr. Emmanuel Ogunyemi has now completed his PhD at Trinity International University and is waiting some months to round up his responsibilities in the US, including his wife's completion of some of her own studies. Eraste and Rose Nyirimana are nearing completion of their PhD's, in Old Testament and New Testament respectively, from the University of KwaZulu Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. William Udotong will soon be rounding up his Doctor of Ministry studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. Today we have with us two others who are nearing completion of their doctorates. Pastor Sola Ajibulu, who among many others worked very hard to prepare for today's program, will receive his Doctor of Ministry degree from Bakke Graduate University, while Solo

Obasi (who is currently here finalizing her research and teaching a Masters module for us) will receive her Doctor of Ministry degree from the University of Wales Bangor in a few months. Our sincere congratulations go to each of these wonderful people, and we look forward to welcoming them back to campus in the not-distant future.

I cannot fail to mention also the fact that while some of these are in the process of returning at least one faculty member is moving in the other direction. Rev. Dr. Charles Osume, beloved associate professor here at WATS, celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday earlier this month and is moving not to entirely leave WATS but to reduce his teaching responsibilities to allow him to focus more time and energies to assist his ethnic community in Delta State. We congratulate Dr. Osume once again on reaching this milestone, and we tell him unhesitatingly in public that we still need his services and his mentoring for many years to come.

I also mention that today we are officially bidding Godspeed to Brian Walters, of the USA, who has spent the past two semesters with us on the WATS staff. Brian is a globetrotter for sure, and came to us from similar short assignments in Korea, China, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere. Thank you for being with us, Brian (better known by his South African name “S’mangaliso”), and may God be with you as you travel on to your next assignment!

Many people have worked to make this program possible today, including especially Rev. B. C. K. Obiako, Rev. Julius Adegbola, Brother Jide Moye and Brother Obaleke Obashoyin. We thank each of them for his sterling efforts.

But two very special people must be mentioned above all the others. First, I thank God for the untiring efforts of Rev. David Njoku, our beloved Deputy Provost. He has labored very long and hard over many months as the virtual head of this institution, and he has done it with singular humility and godly anointing. I owe much personal gratitude to Rev. Njoku, with whom I have worked as a colleague for more than twenty-five years. Rev. Njoku, we salute you today for your faithful work and we honor you for your unflagging energies.

Second, I have a very special word of commendation for the person who from outside the walls of this institution may have done more here in Nigeria than any other single person to make WATS what it is today. I refer to one of our trustees, retired Brigadier General Samuel Teidi. General Teidi has been a brother beloved to me personally, and has worked untiringly to bring WATS to the attention of people far and wide, both in government circles and also in business circles. General Teidi has served humbly and quietly, without seeking any personal

preferments, and has become the kind of friend that makes a huge difference for WATS in reaching its goal of training high-quality leadership for the Church in Africa. General Teidi received his military training at Sandhurst in England, and served both the British and Nigerian armies before his retirement in 1992. We salute him today as a great soldier both for his country and for King Jesus!

Brother and Sisters, we are gathered here today to celebrate, and I hope I can see some genuine joyful dancing-in-the-Lord before the day is over. We have also come together to challenge one another to get behind this vision with our personal financial support. In that regard I am especially pleased that today the Vice President of Nigeria has honored our invitation to be here. I say that because even while he was Governor of Bayelsa State he graciously found some very concrete ways to express his support of this institution.

I hope that each of us has received an envelope as we have entered the ceremony, and I am appealing to each and every one of us to not leave these grounds without making the most generous donation possible for the future of WATS. I am asking every student of WATS to get involved, as well as WATS staff members and every other person here present. May God bless you richly as you respond!

Once again, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for taking time to be with us. Please enter into this program with an open and joyful heart, and I pray as we progress through the program you will catch a part of our vision and will cast your vote to stand with us as we face an exciting and challenging future. God bless you!