

ITS CONNECTIONS

A Quarterly Newsletter of International Theological Seminary



A Professor's Impact

WRITTEN BY SAMMI YAN AND EI MEREN ACIERTO

International Theological Seminary (ITS) trains and equips Christian leaders from around the globe to transform their local communities for Jesus Christ. ITS faculty are at the front line of this vital mission, providing students with the theological education needed to accomplish the task at hand. One of the longest professors to be a part of this ministry is Dr. Joseph Tong, whose history with ITS spans over 30 years. Dr. Tong was instrumental in the seminary's early growth and development. Over the years, he has worked in administration and academics, both as a president of the seminary and as a head professor over the Chinese department. In recent days, even in a time of pandemic, Dr. Tong persists in the work—his dining room table has transformed into a makeshift office space.

Dr. Tong's life is a testament of God's providential hand. Born in Xaimen, China, in 1942, he immigrated with his family to Indonesia in the 1950's. At 16, the Lord saved him and called him to devote himself to church ministry and theological education. Dr. Tong persevered in the academic rigors of this calling. He graduated from Southeast Asian Bible Seminary in Indonesia in 1964, then came to the United States to attend Calvin Theological Seminary in 1971. After acquiring a B.A., B.D., and Th.M. from Calvin, Dr. Tong received a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California in 1978 and an M.B.A. from Indiana Theological Seminary in 1991.

When Dr. Tong first came to work at ITS, there were only five staff and ten Korean students. The institution had \$200 to its name and could only afford to rent a basement in Pasadena to use as a classroom. All faculty and staff were ordained ministers, who either volunteered their time to serve at the school or received financial sponsorships from their churches. Dr. Tong took on the role of leading the school's development department. At the time, he owned a construction company so he was able to use his experience and resources to renovate ITS classrooms and build a seminary library. He personally donated \$20,000 towards these renovations, which inspired another church to raise another \$20,000. The elders of that church also went on to donate personally another \$20,000 so that a total of \$60,000 was gathered as start-up funds for the school.

Because of God's financial provision through the start-up funds, Dr. Tong was able to lead the way in promoting ITS as an up-and-coming seminary, beginning with immediate application for the school's accreditation from the Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education (BPPE). Soon after, ITS established its English, Chinese and Korean departments, which allowed it to develop into an accredited international seminary. Dr. Tong actively participated in various academic events as an ITS representative, sparing no effort to serve ITS abroad in Southeast Asia and South America. Over the next twenty years, ITS would gain exposure worldwide, becoming a well-known name domestically and internationally among Christian academic and church circles throughout the 1990's and 2000's.

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Student Highlight: Harut Khachatryan

WRITTEN BY KATE LEE



Prior to enrolling at ITS, Pastor Harut Khachatryan explored a variety of careers in great breadth and depth, including jewelry design, banking, and video production. After years of experience between fields, Khachatryan's faith guided him to ITS, where he is currently a third-year student completing his M.Div. degree.

Khachatryan was born in a Christian household in Armenia. He looked to his grandfather, a priest and survivor of the Armenian Genocide, as an example of a leader who helped rebuild his town's faith community. Given the name "Harut," meaning "resurrection," Khachatryan found his place in the church at an early age while helping his grandfather lead worship services. After immigrating to Argentina and shortly after, to the U.S. for his mother's cancer treatment, Khachatryan encountered the cultural shock of a new land, language, and community. He took this drastic change as an opportunity to pursue new interests. Khachatryan has remained steadfast in the midst of changing landscapes and life's challenging circumstances in his journey of faith.

"While changing professions, doing everything possible to support my family financially, I was able to learn a variety of what I now call resources," Khachatryan said.

After working for a Christian television channel, Khachatryan began his studies in the M. Div. program at New Theological Seminary of the West. He was subsequently transferred to ITS through a joint M.Div. initiative launched by the two seminaries. At ITS, he found a family of respected professors and classmates from around the world who share his commitment to contextual ministry. The "multicultural setting, the freedom of expression and discovery, the heart of the professors for the student, and the amazing chapel times" have offered Khachatryan a formative chapter of his life for growth and fellowship.

Balancing his studies with raising two sons with his wife, Khachatryan's faith, work ethic, and education at ITS has established a strong foundation on which he can cultivate a faithful life in ministry. His tenacity in the face of adversity bears witness to God's presence in his life. In turn, Khachatryan's compassion for others has made him a warm presence at ITS and a role model to those around him.

Khachatryan holds fast to a "passion for the souls, for the unsaved and the hopeless," and hopes to continue his life's work through his education at ITS. Upon graduation this spring, he looks forward to being ordained to pastoral ministry by the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America. His ordination will provide him with more opportunities to serve his local community through preaching, administration, and missions.



Khachatryan preaches at his local church, United Armenian Congregational Church in Los Angeles. When he is on campus, he assists the ITS student chaplain in leading worship for chapel services.

From The President's Desk

Dear friends in Christ,

I pray that you and your family are safe and well during this unprecedented, challenging time. We at ITS are preparing to complete the current academic year, even as we remain under quarantine. This year has been a very eventful one for the seminary. We relocated to our new campus in West Covina and purchased two student homes adjacent to the campus. We were looking forward to celebrating the relocation to our new campus with you, until COVID-19 affected and forced all of us to reorient our lives.

It has been dizzying and unsettling these last three months. We are searching for the end of the tunnel, but the end seems to be elusive. While it is easy to fall into despair, anxiety and fear in such a dire circumstance as now, I choose to count God's blessings and overcome hopelessness with gratitude—gratitude for life, family and friends, those who serve our community with great commitment and sacrifice, daily provisions, and hope in Christ Jesus.

As you read the current issue of ITS Connections, you will find the pages full of the testimonies of hope and gratitude. Gratitude is not an absence of pain. Gratitude affirms pain but looks beyond it. In the frailty of human condition, God's mercy and faithfulness shines through. We are grateful that we are not left without hope. The ongoing mission of ITS itself is a living testament to God's unfailing love. I am grateful to share the testimonies of our students, graduates, and faculty with you and hope they can be an encouragement to you.

ITS has gone online. You will be able to view our chapel messages, talks and lectures on YouTube. We plan to post more in the coming months. We also plan to hold a baccalaureate service online in celebration of the graduating class of 2020. Please look out for the announcement. I hope you can join us.

Thank you for your steadfast prayers and support for ITS and our students. May the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, carry you and your family ever firmly in this trying time.

Peace and blessings,

James



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(continued) However, Dr. Tong's days at ITS have not been without trials. He admits there were challenges in developing and maintaining an academic institution. During seasons of financial hardship for the seminary, spanning ten of his thirty years at ITS, Dr. Tong received little to no pay. In such times, he had thoughts of giving up, but, by God's grace, he chose to remain in service. As a result, his faithfulness to this call allowed him to invest in hundreds of international students who have passed through the halls of ITS. Most of these students have since returned to their home countries, where they currently serve as instruments of Christ's transforming power in their communities.

Dr. Tong's teaching is not only acquired within the walls of the classroom. On the contrary, students are also able to see that his academic instruction is consistent with the life he leads, which reveals to them that these biblical truths are not just meant to be head knowledge—they must impact the way we live. A first-year M.A. student in the Chinese department affirms, "Dr. Tong's simple life, generous support for others, and willingness to serve the students set a role model for me in daily life. Spiritually, Dr. Tong's tolerance, kindness, fulfilling others, sparing no efforts for ministry, and tirelessly teaching for students inspire me to follow his example with gratitude."

Dr. Tong loves serving in the Chinese department and has a special care and compassion for Chinese international students, stemming from the knowledge of the hardships and limitations that they face in China. Acquiring a strong theological education in China is difficult. Due to socio-political tensions, China has two different church systems. The first is the officially recognized government church, whose rules and teachings are dictated by the government. Such churches place a heavy emphasis on nationalism before anything else. A member of this church is taught that one must love his own country first before he can love God. The second is the underground church, which is not officially recognized by the Chinese government. These churches are hard to sustain due to ongoing oppression from the government and a lack of a solid theological foundation for Christian leaders and scholars. Underground seminaries that form in China are quickly disbanded by the government so that Chinese Christian leaders who desire a robust theological education are forced to seek it in countries like the United States.

For this reason, Dr. Tong continually encourages his students to persevere: "The outlook of teaching sound theological education in China is promising. Everyone should do their best. It is not so much the question of whether it can be done. The key is whether they will do it or not. If our students don't go back and do it, there is no hope for our people at all."

Creating such a sustainable ministry is an important goal, not merely for Chinese students, but for all ITS students. When students come to ITS to acquire quality theological education, they also learn how to create sustainable ministries within their own community contexts. To ease the burden of cost, ITS provides generous scholarships to students with qualifying needs, helping to ensure that most students graduate without debt and are able to focus on what matters most. More importantly, Dr. Tong and the rest of the ITS faculty dedicate themselves to ensuring students are well-equipped both in academic knowledge and in its practical application prior to graduation.

An alumnus (M.Div. '08) who expressed his gratitude for ITS wrote, "The training I get from ITS helps me to lay a solid foundation of theology. Their commitment also provides a good example for me." ITS faculty serve students in more than one capacity—they not only teach students biblical truths, but also challenge them to apply these truths in their own lives. "The way they teach encourages the students to communicate more, opens our horizons, and deepens our minds. . . . We have a lot of opportunities to serve each other."

Dr. Tong's faithful service to ITS serves as a powerful testament of God's sovereignty and providence. ITS is truly blessed by Dr. Tong and his continual dedication to the pursuit of the seminary's mission: to train and equip church leaders from across the globe to transform their communities for Jesus Christ.



In April 2019, President James Lee presented Dr. Tong with a gift on behalf of the ITS community and the ITS Chinese Department in appreciation for Dr. Tong's faithful service.



Vibrant Student Life At ITS

WRITTEN BY ROBIN HARVILL

Student life at ITS is a beautiful taste of heaven – students coming together from all parts of the world to do life together, grow in their faith, and encourage each other along the journey.

As part of ITS's move to a new location in Covina last fall, ITS was able to acquire 2 large homes for student residences, thanks to generous donors who helped provide the down payments. These single family residences serve as warm and welcoming dorms to students from around the globe. Each home has several large bedrooms, common areas, and backyard spaces. Their environments are conducive to cooking and sharing meals together, having lively discussions, times of worship, and studying together. They are also located in close proximity to the new campus location, so students can make the short, 5-minute walk to school.

Some of the ITS students living here are new to the seminary, while others are returning students from the previous year. For example, Esther Mbango, a returning student, is from Cameroon and is completing her final year of study at ITS to earn her M.Div. in Christian education. Back home, she had worked with her sister at Douala Fire Bible Institute as an assistant teacher. Upon graduating from ITS, her vision is to return to Cameroon, well-equipped to teach at the seminary, in addition to serving in her church as a worship pastor. "God called me to education," she said. Esther said that the move to the new ITS campus has provided a much better learning environment. "I feel comfortable, at home and I learn more easily now," she said. Esther said that the students really like the new housing. "It is a great improvement and showed us that God answers prayer!"

Originally from Nigeria, Bako Dogari served as a missionary with Navigators in Northern Ghana for 13 years. After earning his Masters in Theology at Trinity Theological Seminary, he helped develop Discipleship and Missions Alliance (DMA) to serve as a platform to disciple churches.

Students are able to host friends, faculty, and church members for meals in their new dorms. Malawi students (right) pose for a photo with friends from Arcadia Community Church.



To encourage community in the midst of COVID-19, students gather in their own dorms to make a weekly worship livestream for friends and family on social media. Esther (left) shares a devotional from her living room.

While attending a discipleship conference, he met an ITS graduate who encouraged him to apply to ITS. Today he is finishing his dissertation at ITS, while also working virtually with DMA. Upon graduation, he plans to return and grow this ministry in S. Sudan, N. Ghana and Nigeria.

ITS has been instrumental in equipping him for this new journey of "multiplying the laborers in these nations". He said that he has really appreciated the move to the new campus and the dorm housing with its spacious facilities and improved study conditions. He is grateful to the donors who helped acquire the new homes and Covina campus. Bako said, "ITS has a great vision of doing great things efficiently, both financially and programmatically, with little resources".

Ngun Tlem is a new student from Myanmar/Burma and is pursuing a Masters of Theology in New Testament. Prior to coming to ITS, she served at a relative-owned orphanage in India teaching the children about the Bible. She came to ITS to become better equipped so that she could return to the orphanage and to the youth of Myanmar and provide solid Biblical training for the young people there. In a culture dominated by Buddhism, she longs to share the truth of God's love with these youth. In describing the student housing at ITS, Ngun said that it is like a family, with students all coming from different countries. "It is great to be there together. We are blessed to have food to eat and share together." In expressing her gratitude to the donors who are helping with Student Housing contributions, Ngun said, "By their generosity and sacrifice in donating these homes, we can get quality theological training and become equipped, so that we can share this knowledge when we return home. These donors are not just training us, but also the thousands that we will reach back home. I am so thankful."

ITS is grateful for the generous donors who are stepping up to reach thousands for Christ around the world by equipping ITS students with solid theological education so they can return and serve their home countries. We look forward to seeing God's mighty blessing of much fruit born out of this ministry around the world, for generations to come.

ITS CONNECTIONS

Is a publication of International Theological Seminary, whose mission is to equip and train in the reformed tradition teachers, community leaders, and pastors who transform local communities into vibrant places of worship, mission, and justice.

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