

# Society for Pentecostal Studies

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## SPS History<sup>1</sup>

### Beginnings

The Society for Pentecostal Studies, founded in 1970, was first envisioned by three men—William Menzies of the Assemblies of God, Vinson Synan of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, and Horace Ward of the Church of God. Formed with the intent "to serve the church world by providing an authoritative interpretation of the Pentecostal Movement." The Society directed its energies toward bringing scholarship on the Pentecostal tradition to the fore.

At its founding meeting held Dallas, Texas coinciding with the Sixth Pentecostal World Fellowship Conference (WPF), 200 individuals gathered to discuss the state of Pentecostalism. The entire population was either Pentecostal or charismatic. To prevent misunderstanding and underscore its focus on the study of Pentecostalism, the Society quickly changed its name from the Society of Pentecostal Scholars to the Society for Pentecostal Studies. Full membership was predicated upon subscription to the statement of faith of the Pentecostal Fellowship of North American (PFNA), the regional group of the WPF.

### Membership

From the outset the Society's annual meeting provided a dynamic forum for vigorous discussion. But while consensus for the need of academic rigor never wavered, the Society soon discovered its unofficial relationship to the PFNA to be a source of controversy. On the one hand some members felt the Society should become an official organ of the PFNA and thus "the authoritative interpreter of the movement." Others were uneasy, however, that a growing number of persons attending the annual conference were unable to sign the PFNA Statement of Faith and were thereby denied full membership. African Americans and Hispanic Americans felt they could not sign a statement of an organization (PFNA) that had denied membership to their denominations. Oneness Pentecostals objected to the statement's Trinitarian language. Many Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Charismatics could not sign because of the "tongues as initial evidence" clause. In addition, World Pentecostal Fellowship leaders outside North America objected to the Society's purpose statement, which claimed to be the official interpreter for the movement.

These issues were resolved over a four-year period. In 1975 the membership rejected a proposed constitutional amendment to make the Society an official organ of the PFNA. The following year they addressed the WPF's concern by changing their purpose statement to read "to serve the church world by providing a scholarly forum to interpret the Pentecostal movement. In 1982 a constitutional amendment to replace the PFNA statement of faith with the WPF statement of

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from an article written by Kate McGinn and D. William Faupel which appeared in the December 1998 issue of *Ecumenism*.

purpose as the basis for full membership was approved. Finally, the constitution and bylaws were revised in 1980 to incorporate inclusive language.

The list of past presidents attests to at least some success of the Society's attempt to be inclusive. In its 26-year history, four women, three African Americans, two Hispanics, three Canadians, two Methodists, a Oneness Pentecostal, a Roman Catholic and an Episcopalian have been elected to serve in this position.

### **A Scholarly Forum**

In 1979 the first issue of *Pneuma: the Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* was published. Committed to forwarding the cause of Pentecostalism in the academy, the journal was to "contain the fruit of our scholarship in the form of articles given as papers in the annual meeting as well as other articles submitted for publication as well as book reviews." Since its inception the journal has filled a need not met by the more informal newsletter of the Society. A quick survey of the journal's contents illumines not only the natural shifts in the Society, but its maturation as well. In an early issue of volume 1, all four articles depict various aspects of spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. Members of the Assemblies of God authored all four. In volume 10, (1988) all of the articles were international in scope and none were written by a classical Pentecostal. A most recent volume 19 (1997), includes articles on the Anglican-Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada connection, Pentecostal origins, Pentecostal-Evangelical relations, and the nature of God. Contributors run the gamut of Christian denominations. The Journal, like the annual meeting, reflects a multi-discipline perspective.

The breadth of the Society is perhaps best seen at its annual meeting. Conference themes have varied effectively "Jesus Christ and the Gifts of the Spirit" (1982), to Memory and Hope (1996) and from the "Distinctiveness of Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology" (1985) to "The Five-Fold Gospel" (1997). In addition to its plenary sessions, which focus on the theme of the conference, six parallel tracks, governed by special interest groups provide papers in Biblical studies, theological studies, church history, mission, praxis, and religion and culture. The annual meetings are held at institutions that promote the scholarly study of Pentecostalism. Such diverse campuses as Wheaton, Gordon Conwell, Fuller, St. John's College, Wycliffe College, Asbury, Lee University and Southern California College have hosted the annual meeting. Occasionally the society sponsors a publication in book form. Russell Spittler and Vinson Synan's editions of collected essays and William Faupel and Watson Mill's bibliographic introductions are examples.

### **Ecumenical**

Ecumenism has been a natural by-product of the Society. That scholars outside of the Pentecostal circle wish to partake in the debate and contribute to the growing body of literature on Pentecostalism is proof incontrovertible of the admission of Pentecostalism into the academic firmament. But the society has also opened the door for other discussions. Creating a forum has enabled Pentecostals to enter into dialogues with the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Church and the Wesleyan Theological Society. Other members, who apprise the society of their discussions, are in conversation with the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, the Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue is only one year younger than the society itself and was instituted by two of its earliest members. Aligning itself with the Council for the Study of Religion in the late 1980s was another crucial step in refining the society's position academic study and ecumenism.

Unlike strictly academic societies, such as those for church history or biblical studies, and unlike strictly religious societies, the SPS stands, sometimes uncomfortably, with a foot in each camp. Annual meetings offer a full complement of sessions, be they academic or praxis oriented. Membership, now over 600, comprises every major Christian denomination, and some outside Christianity. Meeting participants are as apt to be graduate students from secular schools as they are professors from religiously affiliated colleges.

## Past Presidents

1971 William W. Menzies  
1972 R. Hollis Gause  
1973 Russell P. Spittler  
1974 H. Vinson Synan  
1975 Leonard Lovett  
1976 Don Argue  
1977 Horace S. Ward  
1978 Anthony Palma  
1979 James Beaty  
1980 Stanley Horton  
1981 Ithiel Clemmons  
1982 William G. MacDonald  
1983 Cecil M. Robeck, Jr.  
1984 Harold D. Hunter  
1985 J. Rodman Williams  
1986 Peter Hocken  
1987 Edith Waldvogel Blumhofer  
1988 Ronald Kydd  
1989 Donald W. Dayton

1990 Manuel J. Gaxiola-Gaxiola  
1991 Murray W. Dempster  
1992 D. William Faupel  
1993 Cheryl Bridges Johns  
1994 Roger Stronstad  
1996 Eldin Villafañe  
1997 Grant Wacker  
1998 J. Chris Thomas  
1999 Rebecca Skaggs  
2000 Frank D. Macchia  
2001 Sherry DuPree  
2002 Samuel Solivan  
2003 Ralph Del Colle  
2004 Steven Jack Land  
2005 Anthea Butler  
2006 Blaine Charette  
2007 David Daniels  
2008 Terry Cross  
2009 Amos Yong