

Thursday, April 1, 2010

Anthropology professor to study Pentecostalism in Latin America

By Dan Bodene, contributing writer

Henri Gooren, Ph.D., Oakland University assistant professor of anthropology, recently beat some long odds to secure a \$100,000 grant to study in Chile and Paraguay.

Dr. Gooren received one of only 16 grants awarded by the Pentecostal-Charismatic Research Initiative, funded by the Templeton Foundation and administered by the University of Southern California. By Dr. Gooren's reckoning, less than five percent of applicants succeeded in receiving a grant. But Dr. Gooren made a compelling case for his.

"As a cultural anthropologist, I look at what motivates people in other cultures," said Dr. Gooren. "Religion is one of the biggest motivators, which is why I have studied religion. I've studied Pentecostalism for about 15 years."

A self-described "Dutchman living in the U.S. and studying religions in Latin America," Dr. Gooren will examine the "Pentecostalization" of religion and society in Paraguay and Chile.

"Henri's work – and its impressive support by the Templeton Foundation – enhances two areas where Oakland University is nurturing growth and development: religious studies and international studies," said Ronald Sudol, Ph.D., dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Pentecostalism can be defined as "a charismatic renewal movement within Christianity that places special emphasis on a direct personal experience of God." Pentecostal experiences may include speaking in tongues, healing, prophesy and miracles. According to Dr. Gooren, though there is no central church or organization, Pentecostals claim nearly half a billion adherents throughout the world, and Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing form of Christianity.

Dr. Gooren's research will examine Pentecostal growth and influence in one of the wealthiest and most recognizable nations in Latin America – Chile; and one of the poorest and least understood – Paraguay.

"We know that Pentecostalism is growing in Latin America," said Dr. Gooren. "I want to study Pentecostal influences on mass media, politics, civil society, economic behavior and gender relations. What does it mean for a society in which 24 percent of the population is Pentecostal?"

To advise him, Dr. Gooren has assembled a panel that includes internationally recognized experts on Pentecostalism in Latin America, Africa, and Asia; general experts on Pentecostalism; and experts on Chile and Paraguay.

Dr. Gooren's project will take about two years to complete. Fieldwork will be done in Santiago, Chile and Asuncion, Paraguay during the summers of 2010 and 2011, with help from local research assistants. His ethnographic research will include participant observation, interviews and surveys.

On the one hand, recent earthquakes in Chile may complicate things. On the other hand, Dr. Gooren is intrigued by historical precedent that Pentecostalism "exploded" in other countries in the aftermath of an earthquake.

Right now, in between teaching classes, Dr. Gooren is planning the first meeting of his international panel here at OU, as well as the logistics of his fieldwork trips. Additionally, his new book will come out this summer, "Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation – Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices."

"I get from 50 to 60 e-mails every day, plus I have a full teaching load," said Dr. Gooren. "It's a very busy time."



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SUMMARY

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