

Into the future: Commencements

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

Over the years I have attended many commencement ceremonies as a parent, occasionally as the speaker and this year, for the first time, as a grandparent. One ceremony that stands out in my mind is when my daughter received her M.D. from Ohio State. It was held in the stadium where in the fall the Buckeyes play before more than 100,000 zealous football fans. The playing field was filled from one goal line to the 50-yard line with graduates in their robes and colorful academic hoods. The commencement speaker was a distinguished chemist who delivered an exceedingly long oration on his academic specialty.

In the meantime degree candidates in each of the graduate schools were amusing themselves and the crowd with irreverent and symbolic gestures. Business school students, en masse, pulled copies of the *Wall Street Journal* from beneath their robes and proceeded to read. Veterinary school graduates inflated rubber examination gloves with helium and launched them into the June sky. Champagne corks popped here and there. It was quite an occasion.

Nevertheless, I love commencements, and I am always deeply touched when I witness or participate in them.

The *Chicago Tribune* carried a feature last year titled “Go Forth, Young Grads, and Dare to Be Ordinary.” The writer observed that few commencement addresses are memorable and almost all are quickly forgotten. Nevertheless, the choice of a commencement speaker requires diligent and careful attention. The perfect speaker, the *Tribune* said, should possess Jessica Simpson’s Q rating (I didn’t even know what that meant—my granddaughter told me she’s a singer), Chris Rock’s star presence, Ted Koppel’s gravitas and Warren Buffett’s wealth.

When North Park Seminary, a fine Evangelical Covenant school in Chicago, invited me to speak this year, it got none of that. But it did get someone who is always thrilled to be part of the proceedings. I told the graduates what I suspect many speakers said this year, that the world and the church are changing more rapidly than we can comprehend. I told them that some things are the same: the world and

the church desperately need their energy, imagination, passion, impatience, intelligence and love. And I told them that one of the great biblical themes is that God calls them and all of us to walk into the future without knowing exactly where we are headed, to let go of old securities and certainties and trust the God who promises to be with us wherever we go.

I had thought about that good promise one week earlier, when on behalf of the Board of Trustees I handed diplomas to McCormick Theological Seminary graduates in the University of Chicago's Rockefeller Chapel. What a powerful and hopeful occasion it was to watch this culturally and racially diverse group walk across the chancel and receive their Master of Divinity degrees.

And I thought about the good promise of God's presence and blessing as I sat in a Dallas auditorium one week later and watched one more ceremony, this time with a granddaughter graduating from high school and headed into the rest of her life. It may have been the best commencement of all.