

SEMINARIES BLAZE ONLINE PATHS TO DEGREES FOR THE PLACE-BOUND

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Someday we may be asking ourselves if we remember what life was like in the beginning of 2007.

Remember the days when we didn't have iPhones?

Remember when we didn't know how the Harry Potter books ended?

Remember how things were when you had to physically uproot and move your family across the country to enroll in seminary?

Five years ago all of that changed. Now it's possible to chat on your iPhone as you prep for an exam with your seminary friends, tuck your son into bed while convincing him that Harry will be safe, and earn your Master of Divinity (MDiv) at the same time — all without leaving your neighborhood.

Just a few years ago, many seminaries offered a few continuing education modules or MDiv distance education courses a la carte, but in 2007 the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (UDTS) launched the first Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) distance MDiv Program. At the same time, other Presbyterian seminaries, including McCormick, Union and Princeton, are weaving distance offerings into their degree-seeking and continuing education catalogs.

UDTS began the foray into distance learning

with its Commissioned Ruling Elder (CRE) program in 2000, offering PC(USA)-required courses for those training to become CREs. Then, in the summer of 2004, UDTS started offering certain MDiv classes in a similar online format.

In 2007, UDTS received accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools to provide the MDiv degree with courses primarily offered with a blend of online and in-person requirements, making it the only fully accredited distance MDiv program in the denomination. UDTS now offers two distance-learning degrees, the MDiv and a Master of Arts in Missional Christianity.

The degrees are the same whether earned in residence or through distance education. UDTS's course requirements for each class are the same regardless of format. Having these options allows those unable to relocate due to family and work commitments to follow God's call into accredited Presbyterian theological education.

Many students in UDTS's distance program serve as CREs in smaller congregations that would have difficulty finding new leadership should the student relocate to pursue a residential seminary. Because technology affords new ways to institute

seminary learning, these students bring the richness gained in their roles as CREs to their classes and are not forced to abandon their congregations.

Technology is not just a new tool — it is a new language and a new reality for churches and their leaders. Distance theological education employs the same biblical principles as residential learning and is congruent in the aim to bring glory and honor to God through growth and learning. It is a tool for serving Christ. Online educational technology is a blessing for students who would otherwise be unable to pursue a seminary education.

A BALANCING ACT

No less called and no less committed than their residential brothers and sisters, many distance students balance full-time employment and family obligations with full-time theological study. Twice a year, students from around the globe — as near as central Iowa and as far as Lebanon — sacrifice vacation time to gather at UDTS in Dubuque for two-week intensive courses and community building.

These biannual residencies comprise one-third of their degree courses and credits. The remaining classes are offered through an online platform that blends video and audio lectures with interactive discussion boards. This blend of distance and residential learning enables students to earn an MDiv in four (very busy!) years.

Each two-week residency is an intense period of scholarship and relationship. This time has distinct benefits for the distance student community. During these residencies, “students are removed from the daily demands of home, and the time shared together in spiritual formation has the feeling of a retreat,” says Beth McCaw, pastor to students at the Dubuque Seminary. “Groups have created strong bonds that are fruitful and carry through four years of study.”

When a student joins the UDTS program, he or she makes a commitment to be in Dubuque each August and January for the next four years. For one student, this meant he would miss his daughter’s birthdays.

On his daughter’s birthday last January, this dad arrived in class with a birthday cake. During a break, the class joined in his celebration — as did his daughter via the gift of video technology. They saw each other over the Internet as candles were lit in both locations, “Happy Birthday” was sung and cake was eaten. Not only had this father found a way to celebrate with his daughter; he had also connected his family celebration with his

seminary family.

McCaw said it has been “a happy surprise to discover the depth of thirst that distance students have for an experience of community with one another and the wider student body.” Distance students remind their residential brothers and sisters of the preciousness of the common life in seminary described by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in “Life Together,” she said.

“Daily chapel worship during residencies are cherished and are marked by a distinctive vitality,” McCaw said. “Class discussions online are shaped by the eager expectation that every member’s contribution is necessary to yield the richest offerings. Fellowship planning is influenced by the challenge to draw in those who might be at the margins — geographically or otherwise.”

TRAINING THAT LEAVES BONDS INTACT

Some question whether embodied theology can be taught in such a “disembodied” fashion. UDTS Dean of the Seminary Bradley Longfield believes the UDTS approach allows distance theological education to become much more embedded with congregational life. This mirrors pre-19th century theological education, when pastors were trained within the pastoral ministry context, and it further bonds the congregation with the discipline of theological education.

UDTS’s distance students are able to remain connected to their church and the community that affirmed their call. Students complete their MDiv, participate in internships and clinical pastoral education and take ordination exams without relocating or needing to take classes at non-Presbyterian seminaries.

To these students, the seminary becomes another provider of support while students are on campus and in their home environment. Rather than being uprooted, seminarians pursuing distance education continue to enjoy learning, growing and serving in the local church that nurtured their emerging sense of call.

Assistant Dean of the Seminary Richard Shaffer said UDTS started offering distance education with the CRE courses, then moved into master’s degree programs and now is expanding its offerings for the wider church, including elders and other church leaders. For example, the seminary offers an online course on the new Form of Government that addresses the immediate needs of current leaders.

UDTS is also initiating a pilot program in conjunction with the Synod of Lakes and Prairies

to provide training for ruling elders. Theological education isn't always for academic credit, but it can deliver growth and lifelong learning for the people of God.

Continuing pastoral education from a distance is a practice that has already been more widely accepted in many of our seminaries. Princeton Theological Seminary is also exploring emerging technology to deliver interactive instruction and mentoring to pastors and church leaders anywhere they are currently working.

Charles Kalmbach, director of the School of Christian Vocation and Mission at Princeton, said that three years ago the seminary redirected its continuing education function in recognition of the barriers that prevent pastors and other leaders from spending more than a week on campus. To address this, Princeton Seminary has increased the programs it provides to dense centers of its target audiences. Additionally, the seminary has engaged "the most appropriate technology we can find in order to reach out virtually to our audience," Kalmbach said.

Once a month, the seminary broadcasts the "Princeton Monthly Conversation." This webcast of a program offered to pastors at Cooper Conference Center allows up to 200 church leaders elsewhere to view the program in real time.

It is possible that these uses of technology will also make their way into the degree programs. "While Princeton Theological Seminary remains convinced of the enormous benefits of preserving a residential community as the primary context for church leadership formation, discussions are taking place with faculty regarding forms of distance learning," said James Kay, the seminary's dean of academic affairs.

Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Va., has been using a hybrid format they call their "Extended Campus Program" to offer a Master of Arts in Christian Education degree since 1993. Last fall, Union began a three-year pilot program for MDiv courses that feature this hybrid format. Hybrid classes will include short but intensive periods of instruction on campus, plus a distance component.

It is not yet possible to earn Union's MDiv degree fully through this format. Academic Dean Stanley H. Skreslet said Union's faculty expects this kind of course to become a bigger part of curriculum planning.

CHALLENGES, AND REWARDS, FOR FACULTY

In general, professors of distance-education courses are very positive about their teaching experience.

McCormick Theological Seminary offers certain classes via distance education. Melody Knowles, associate professor of Hebrew Scriptures at McCormick, taught an online course called "Film and the Bible" as an opportunity for students to explore the portrayal of biblical stories through a selection of international films.

"For me, the challenge of teaching this class was to reframe all of the 'regular' course components (lectures, discussion, readings, research, presentations, etc.) in ways that take the online environment seriously," Knowles said. It was an upper-level class, and she was pleased to find that

Ken Sawyer, an associate professor at McCormick Theological Seminary, welcomed the flexibility scheduling and location that distance learning offered students.

students were already familiar with engaging academic commentary and personal experience with biblical conversation.

Ken Sawyer, associate professor of church history at McCormick, taught an online course in American Presbyterian history. He said he was impressed with students' level of engagement with primary texts. Online forum discussions "showed close reading and good give-and-take," he said.

Although Sawyer prefers the face-to-face class format, the online format and work of his students continually surprised him. An additional benefit, he said, was the great flexibility in scheduling and location that the format offered students, who lived in North Carolina, Chicago, Tennessee and Atlanta.

"I am grateful to this group of students, willing to take on an experimental class format, and with their suggestions for improvements, we will be ready for another offering of this course soon," Sawyer said.

Professors in UDTS's MDiv program teach the same courses for residential and distance students,

although the delivery methods vary. Gary Hansen, assistant professor of church history, was initially dubious about distance education. However, he notes that online, all students must focus their engagement and participation.

“The quiet student or the culturally marginalized student gets heard, and everyone gains. ... The discussion stays more focused and often digs deeper into the issue” than in residential courses.

However, lest it be thought that distance education is a simple solution, Hansen notes that teaching online takes more time than teaching in a classroom. Ironically, online classes offer more direct engagement with students, since the professor is interacting with a much higher proportion of the class more frequently than in a residential course, where only a few students may talk with a faculty member outside of lectures.

TRAINING BY AN ‘ALL-STAR CAST’?

What does the future of distance theological education hold? As a denomination, we still have many questions to explore as we raise up new leaders in a changing society. How does a unified student body establish a meeting schedule (for events such as student council) or faculty members schedule office hours when the daily routine of residential students is markedly different from that of distance students with day jobs? How might the call process differ for graduates of distance programs?

Keith Leach, a member of UDTs’s first distance cohort, was the first to accept a call. Pastor nominating committees asked questions about the process and sought additional information to understand the unusual path he had taken through seminary. He had to explain that he was finishing his final year of seminary but was not living in Iowa, and why his personal information form looked different from other students’.

However, it was the variety of strengths that Leach brought to being a distance student that also brought strength to ministry. He offered the wisdom and experience of a second-career pastor with over nine years of experience leading worship.

Another question that is getting some attention is how to allow the distance experience to join the full body of Christ. As Princeton’s new library nears completion, soon it will be able to provide worldwide electronic access to its holdings.

A current student in the UDTs distance program envisions a collaborative Presbyterian program: “Wouldn’t it be great if we could offer an

all-star cast of instructors teaching their favorite courses via distance education? Students from all seminaries could opt in as electives. Imagine having access to an Old Testament course from Dr. Brueggeman (Columbia), some pastoral care from Dr. Purves (Pittsburgh), New Testament from Dr. Aymer (Interdenominational Theological Center) ... I could go on!”

If you’re feeling nervous, sit back down. The pew pad isn’t going to be pulled out from under you completely. Residential seminary education will always have a role in the preparation of the church’s leaders. There are students who will do better in residential programs with face-to-face encouragement and accountability, while others will benefit from programs that allow flexibility when they are unable to move due to family or employment situations.

Theological education will always remain connected to the local church and honoring God through its service. McCaw notes, “the distance students at UDTs have strengthened the seminary’s practical connection to the local church and her call.”

The goal of seminary remains the same: prepare faithful, educated, spiritually nourished leaders in a manner that brings glory to God and builds the Kingdom — both online and off.

Are you still on the fence about distance education? As Jesus said, “Come and see.” ●

