

BOB SMIETANA

A look at an online course at North Park

Rich Moore was talking with his wife, Mimi, one evening when she asked him a question. “If there were no obstacles,” she asked, “and money was no object, what would you do with your life?”

“I told her that I’d either like to teach at a community college,” Moore said, “or pastor a church.”

Becoming a pastor was not an option. There was no seminary near Lincoln, Nebraska, where they lived. Moving to Chicago to attend North Park Seminary seemed out of the question the Moores had two young boys who were in school, and Mimi had a good job in the community. In addition, health concerns about several family members made the Moores reluctant to move.

So Moore enrolled in a master of adult education program at the University of Nebraska. While there, he started teaching undergraduate classes.

Since he still had a desire to be a pastor, he served as a lay minister at First Covenant Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. When local pastors went on vacation, Moore would preach at their churches. One of those pulpit supply assignments led to a call to serve as the pastor of Swedeburg Covenant Church in Wahoo, Nebraska.

“I went up and filled in for a couple of Sundays,” Moore says. “One thing led to another, and that led to a call.”

Moore started at the church in a part-time position, which allowed him to finish his master’s degree. After finishing his degree, Moore realized that he felt called into full-time ministry.

“After the church had called me, I realized that this is where God wants me,” he said. “He was calling me to ministry and I might as well answer the call.”

Moore still had a problem—how to go to seminary.

He started taking distance education classes through Bethel Seminary in Minneapolis. At the time, Bethel

Cyber



Seminary



was one of the few accredited seminaries that offered distance learning. After accepting a call to the Covenant church in Sloan, Iowa in 1996, Moore took some on-campus classes at a seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Since Moore was serving a Covenant church and wanted to be ordained in the Covenant, he also needed classes at North Park Seminary.

He took a few intensive courses, flying in for a week at a time. This past spring, instead of flying to Chicago, he logged on to his computer for an online seminary class at North Park. The course was Old Testament Faith I, the first of a growing number of seminary courses to be offered online.

In 1999-2000, the seminary offered three courses online. For 2000-2001, that number has grown to nine.

Each student in the Old Testament class was given access to a specialized website. The course syllabus and assignments were posted on the website, along with a bulletin board for posting student assignments, comments, and announcements. The students also took their quizzes and midterms online. The class met online each week for a two-hour chat room lecture and discussion.

Students in the class came from a variety of backgrounds. Several, like Moore, were in full-time ministry. Others were lay people who were seeking more training to help them in their ministry in the local church.

Nancy Ebner of Berlin, Connecticut, has helped lead the adult education program at Bethany Covenant Church for a number of years. A mother of four, Ebner says that she doesn't feel called to seminary as a full-time student, at least not now. But she was looking for a new learning experience. "I wanted to be stretched," she says, "to keep learning and growing."

Though there were several seminaries within an hour of her home, Ebner was interested in North Park because of her Covenant connection. While she

says that she enjoyed the class and felt challenged by it, she also experienced some technical difficulties. On the first night of class she wasn't able to get into the chat room—her web browser was not compatible with the website software.

Rather than miss class, Ebner went next door and asked her neighbor if she could borrow her computer. "She knows me very well," Ebner says, "and she was surprised and laughed at me. 'You are taking what?' she said. She didn't know I had signed up for the class, but she had a newer machine and that put me in touch. The next day I downloaded a newer browser and was all set. That's the frustrating side for someone who is 1,000 miles away."

Susan Radosti, of Sioux City, Iowa, took the course as part of a certificate in faith and health at North Park. Radosti, who is also working on a master's in religious studies from a seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, is a massage therapist in private practice. She says that while many people in her profession are interested in spirituality, few are interested in Christianity. She hopes the certificate in faith and health will help integrate her faith and her practice.

"People in my profession stay away from what I would call orthodox Christianity," she says. "The church is partly to blame for that. We haven't had a healthy attitude towards the body—but that is changing, and this new degree at North Park is part of that."

Taking the Old Testament course has already paid dividends for Radosti, who coordinates small groups and serves as chairperson of First Covenant Church in Sioux City. She has used material from the class to help her prepare devotionals at church council meeting. She also says that the class has helped her get more out of the sermons.

"When we have an Old Testament

Bob Smietana is associate editor of The Covenant Companion.

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Intensive Courses

Another way that North Park and other seminaries are making their courses accessible to more students is by offering intensive courses. Intensive courses are usually one or two weeks long, and allow students to have as much time in the classroom as a semester long class (thirty to forty hours).

Susan Radosti of Sioux City, Iowa, who has taken several online courses, took two intensive courses this past summer. She says that she enjoyed having the face-to-face interaction with faculty, and having the chance to get to know other students.

"I really enjoyed the classes," she says. "It was good to be there at the seminary. Though you don't get the same sense of community that you would if you were on campus all of those weeks, I was surprised by how fast I formed relationships with other students."



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reference in a pastor's sermon," she says, "I have a lot better understanding of the culture and the context that it's coming out of."

Bob Hubbard, professor of Old Testament at North Park, taught the online course. He has been teaching Old Testament for twenty-four years, first at Denver Seminary and now at North Park since 1995. He had to make a number of changes to the face-to-face version of the course in order to make it work online.

"One of the things I had to do as we went along," he says, "was revise my lecture notes. On campus I print them up into a booklet, and then the students can just make notes as I lecture. But online they are just reading them. I have had to go through and add more wording, so that they can read through them and have a clear idea of what I am saying."

Hubbard also added maps and charts to the web version of his lecture notes. He also added links to websites, where students could go for additional information.

During the weekly chat sessions, Hubbard would check in with students to see if they had questions. He then led a discussion of the topics in the lecture notes as well as that week readings. In some ways, the chat room discussions were better than discussions in a classroom session.

"I think it does give more people a chance to participate than an ordinary class," he says. "I have heard other people who have taught Internet courses say that as well. The person who might sit in the back and not ask a question in a class of twenty, feels more free to do that in a chat room."

The chat room format also allowed Hubbard to track each student's responses, and to draw out students who weren't participating. In a typical two-hour chat session, each student gave close to forty responses. Hubbard says that he was surprised by their insight into the course material.

"They asked some very pointed questions," he says. "Not controversial questions, but very penetrating questions that I don't know that I'd ever been asked before. [On a couple of occasions] I was so startled that I almost felt that I was not capable of answering. I almost found myself pulling together an answer, my mind spinning at the same time, and trying to type a response."

One student brought up the question of the Nephilim found in Genesis six, just before the story of the Flood. Hubbard says that he doesn't normally cover the Nephilim in class, but students started asking questions, leading to a wide-ranging discussion about who they were and where else they occur in the Bible. He says that he used the discussion to follow up with the class their previous discussion on principles of interpreting Scripture.

"As a professor, I turned it into an interpretive experience," he says. "I kept pushing them, asking, 'What does the text say?' They had various kind of views about who the Nephilim were and what they meant. I kept saying, 'Okay, if that is true, where in the text does it seem to suggest or confirm that?' It was just on the heels of our interpretation principles section of the course, so I could use that to force them to listen carefully, to face the text, and to confirm what they thought or didn't think, and then draw their conclusions."

Hubbard and several students said that one of the drawbacks of the online class was the limited contact between faculty and students, especially outside the classroom.

"I know some things about the students," he says, "but I am not sure that I know them in the same way that if we could sit and have coffee together on campus or have lunch, or they could stop by my office for a lengthy chat."

Moore, who has taken about twenty seminary courses online (at several schools), says that he has had to find alternate ways to make contact outside the classroom.

"Instead of sitting down and having a coke with another student and talking about a passage," he says, "I send an email."

The Association of Theological Schools, which governs how seminaries operate, recently announced policy changes that allow student to take up to two-thirds of their course work through distance education. While some graduate schools offer complete degrees online, at least one student hoped that seminaries would maintain a personal component.

"I can't really see getting a seminary degree online," Ebner said. "I hope that a student would have to meet face-to-face with someone at some point."

Still, Ebner noted that without the online option, she would have not been able to take a North Park Seminary course. Several other students mentioned that while they have an interest in North Park Seminary, relocating to Chicago is not an option. Some had spouse with careers that limited where they could move. Others have children in school, or are already serving in significant ministry.

Moore says that during many of the chat room sessions, he was able to talk with other students about how the material covered in class would apply in a local church setting.

"That's the advantage of being a student and a pastor," he says. "I can relate what is going on in class right into the church right away. That's the way I learn best—I have to apply what I am learning or I will lose it."

Having distance education options like online classes has allowed Moore to follow his calling to rural ministry while still pursuing his education. He doesn't think that he would have able to earn a master's of divinity without them.

"The nearest seminary is seventy-five miles away in Sioux Falls," he says. "I have taken classes there, but there is just no way that I can drive the 150 miles there on a full-time basis." □

For More Information

A complete listing of online and intensive courses at North Park Theological Seminary can be found online at:
<http://www.northpark.edu/sem/acad.html>