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Higher Education— Now a Click Away

by Daryl Ellis

As distance learning expands across the Web, so do opportunities to take leading online graduate and seminary courses without needing to pack up and leave home.

Shelly Spidel is a worship leader at a Methodist church in a small Alabama town. Like many church leaders, as Spidel's ministry progressed, she desired further education as a way to promote growth and spiritual maturity. The only problem? No seminary was within driving distance. Faced with having to either abandon her ministry or go without helpful education, Spidel discovered Reformed Theological Seminary's online degree program. She could earn a master's degree in religion without having to relocate. However, the convenience of the program is only one of its many strengths, says Spidel. She credits the online program as "the greatest catalyst for spiritual growth in my life thus far."

According to Steve Kemp, former president of ACCESS, the Christian distance edu-

cation professional association, Spidel's experience is very common. It is also the type that leads Kemp to believe that a better title for distance learning is accessible education. Online-degree programs make high-quality, biblically based education truly accessible across geographical, vocational, and personal barriers. They deliver the education to you.

Distance Learning—What is it?

As Web-based resources have exploded over the last decade or so, so have the distance learning courses offered by universities and colleges in the U.S. The leading survey on distance learning in the U.S. reported that nearly 4 million students took an online course during fall 2007, a 12 percent increase from the previous year. Meanwhile, the overall higher education student popu-

lation during that time period only grew by 1.2 percent. Such numbers support Kemp's view that online courses are "the new normal," as they provide a variety of educational options for a broader swath of students.

Indeed, in his current position as academic dean of the Antioch School of Church Planting and Leadership Development, Kemp continues to offer diverse options to those seeking training and ministry education. Modeling the early church's focus on local, church-based theological education, Antioch School is building a network in which theological degree programs are made available within the context of local churches. According to Kemp, "The central context of student development in Antioch School programs is the work of the Holy Spirit in local churches." Such innovations in the ways professors and students can meet

are the mark of higher education in the 21st century.

The growth of Christian distance learning in the last decade follows the overall growth trend reported above. For instance, Indiana Wesleyan University, which began offering online degrees in 1998, now has 27 online degrees and certificates and nearly 4,700 students solely online, who make up about 30 percent of the school's enrollment. The administrators at Indiana Wesleyan and other similar programs see the task of extending education beyond their campus as part of their distinctly Christian mission. Mark Alexander, director of the Center for Distributed Learning at Indiana Wesleyan, even terms the school's online presence a "perfect complement" to the school's Christ-centered mission of "changing the world by developing students in character, scholarship, and leadership." Mary Lowe, executive director of ACCESS and director of online instruction at Erskine

Theological Seminary, agrees. "As long as Christians remain open to God's leading," she says, "seminaries have to consider ways that will best prepare men and women for service in the Christian church. Distance education is one way that [they] can fulfill this mandate."

Not surprisingly, the specific shape of distance education varies depending on the school and its program. As is the case with Reformed Theological Seminary, many Christian distance learning programs are geared toward equipping Christian leaders for church-based ministry.

Another example of this approach is Bethel Seminary's InMinistry program, which offers five master's degrees. InMinistry's mission statement makes it quite clear: "Now you don't have to move to go to seminary." This strategy carries with it considerable educational motivation and purpose. As Kristin Anderson, director of InMinistry Distributive Learning Programs,

notes, "In the InMinistry model, we've asked [our students] to stay in the position to which God has currently called them." This technique not only allows students to continue in their current ministry context, but also enables them to apply their studies concretely and immediately. Anderson says, "When students can stay in their context, they have an opportunity to integrate their studies into the present-tense realities of ministry leadership."

Just across campus from Bethel Seminary, Bethel University is focusing on offering distance learning programs in other disciplines. These programs don't exclusively focus on training for ministry per se, but focus more on training leaders to live out "transformational leadership" in whatever context they are in. For example, Craig Paulson, director of Bethel's Doctoral and Licensing Program in Education Administration, says the focal point of his program is "integrating faith and leadership prac-



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—NATASHA COZART, STUDENT

tices" in the hope of training public intellectuals who lead with character and effective interpersonal skills.

While students in the program do not have to be Christians to enroll, Paulson has been shocked at how God has used the program to transform the lives of students. "It is amazing," he says, "how many people are coming to a personal relationship with Christ through the program." Given the program's dynamic nature, it's no surprise that Paulson sees the program's place within Bethel as "an extension of being salt and light to the world and to be that witness to the world."

Matt Newby, director of Distributive Learning for Crown College based in Saint Bonifacius, Minnesota, echoes the theme of being salt and light in the world. Crown's Adult and Graduate Studies Distance Learning Program offers online classes in connection with nine degrees. Crown offers degrees ranging from undergradu-

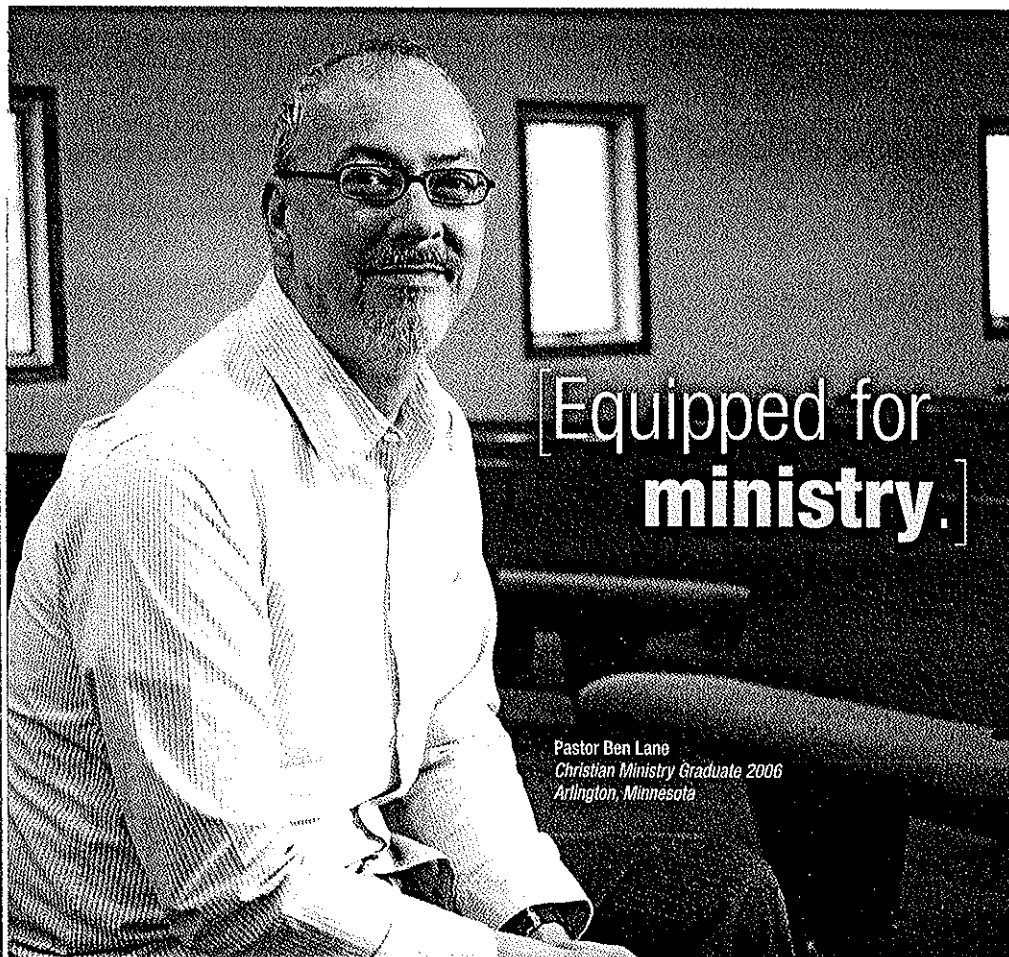
ate programs in Christian ministry and nursing to graduate programs in educational leadership and organizational leadership. No matter the degree, Crown's distance learners are required to take Bible classes as a way of experiencing a holistic Christian education. Regarding the program's mission, Newby says, "The intent is to reach whatever population we can with biblically based education, and to integrate faith into those courses."

Whereas the online degree programs at Bethel University, Bethel Seminary, and Reformed Theological Seminary focus on making graduate education accessible, a distinctive mark of Crown's program is helping students complete undergraduate degrees begun elsewhere.

Janet Woolfrey is one student who has benefited from Crown's focus on helping students earn their undergraduate degree. Having already completed an associate's degree, Janet felt God calling

her to the position of small group director at her church, but also felt the need to go back and complete her bachelor's degree. Given her family circumstances, Crown's program was a great fit for her. She says, "I am fortunate that I have the ability to take classes online because of my four children, two [of whom] are still at home. My oldest has Down syndrome and my youngest is 12, so I could not afford to be gone from home any more than I already am."

Newby says most of his students come to Crown's distance learning program for degree completion, and that the school works hard to tailor each student's program in a way that maximizes the transfer credit given to the student. For this focus, and for Crown's program as a whole, Woolfrey and her family are grateful. Reflecting on her experience at Crown, she says, "This format [of education] has allowed me [opportunities] that I would



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Distance Learning—How does it work?

Most distance learning programs center on online components that form the core of the educational experience. A main online feature of distance learning is a discussion board where students enrolled in the same course comment on assigned readings or a question from the professor. This format means the students' differing settings, time zones—and even countries—can actually enhance the quality of their education. Usually, students are required to leave a certain number of comments within a certain timeframe. However, comments can be left at any time; because of students' schedules, they are online at different times leaving comments and asking questions. This dynamic lends itself to students reflecting over time on others' questions and comments. The most effective learning does not come immediately, but develops organically and with sustained reflection. Discussion

boards help nurture this type of learning.

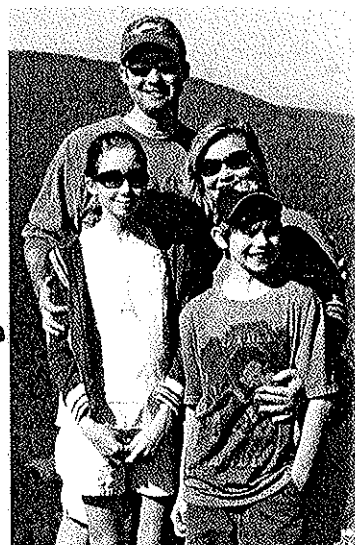
Discussion boards also successfully build into the very nature of the course a sense that students are learning and engaging the course material throughout the duration of the course. In many on-campus classes, it can be much easier to leave the coursework to the last week or two of course. But distance learning courses ensure that students are ongoingly attentive to course material. Because of this, Kemp argues that student "interactivity [in an online course] is actually typically better than in a classroom." As he observes, "Nobody sleeps in an online course."

Typically, each class has a password-protected "online hub" where professors post syllabi and lectures, assign and receive assignments, and monitor discussion boards. In terms of lectures, the online-hub software allows professors to give lectures live online or post videos or audio-recorded lectures that students can then "attend" at their convenience. Andy Peterson, president of Reformed Theological Seminary, Virtual Campus, says that his program occa-

Busy Family Finds Flexibility Online

David Howell—Erskine Theological Seminary
(Due West, South Carolina)

It is often the case, David Howell's decision to pursue a seminary degree involved change for his family. His wife, Angie, kindly returned to the working world so that he could pursue his degree. Furthermore, Howell not only took primary responsibility in caring for their two children, but he also worked at his church as the new member coordinator and now, due to a job vacancy, as the interim youth director. Erskine Theological Seminary's online distance learning program provides the flexibility necessary to help him succeed as a husband, a father, an employee, and a student. "Since I am currently wearing several hats," Howell says, "the online program allows me to set up a schedule for watching the lectures and completing the assignments that complements my schedule outside of school." Originally trained as an information technology consultant, Howell now looks forward to a bright future in ministry thanks to his education at Erskine. In his words, "My seminary experience has been a blessing to me and my family, and we eagerly anticipate God's guidance in our future." —DE



sionally uses this technology to combine online courses with traditional courses. They do this by broadcasting ("webcasting") in-class lectures online so that students can not only view the lecture, but can also ask questions alongside in-class students. Peterson calls this process "piggybacking" a lecture. The webcasted lecture is then made available online for other students to view when their schedules allow.

In addition to these online components, some programs integrate occasional on-campus elements into the degree program. For example, Bethel uses what is known as a "cohort-model," in which all incoming members of a degree program come to Bethel's Minneapolis campus yearly for a weeklong intensive class to spend time together and nurture the learning community. InMinistry director Anderson notes, "Cohorts become more than classmates. [They] come alongside other classmates in a way that causes transformation and through which they can walk through life together." As an example of this closeness, Anderson cites one student that recently initiated a reunion, despite the fact that she and her classmates had completed their degrees about two years ago.

By weaving all of these elements together and integrating new technologies as they arise, the Christian distance-learning community continues to provide a compelling avenue by which Christians and non-Christians alike can receive high-quality education without having to uproot their lives and their families. The convenience of distance education has often been its most heralded quality, but distance learning is gaining a reputation in education circles for its exceptional results as well. Anderson credits this, at least in part, to the fact that distance learning tends to be a place where "greater priority [is] placed on learning as opposed to grades alone."

Kemp agrees. "Because of the increased scrutiny placed upon them," he says, "distance learning programs have not shied away from having to prove their outcomes, from explicitly [demonstrating] that the students deserve the degrees they are getting." The programs are "tightly oriented around learning outcomes," which means

that they are not only convenient for students, but also exceedingly formative and practical. Drew Klinsing, a student in Bethel's InMinistry program, boasts, "Bethel has been exactly what I needed in a ministry education: quality academics, authentic spiritual formation, and practical ministry integrated into every class,

no matter the topic."

All of this suggests that with these Christian distance programs, time spent online can at last be time well spent and wisely invested.

Daryl Ellis, a senior at Princeton Theological Seminary. Ellis hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in systematic theology in the years to come.

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