

Revitalized Jesus Seminar gets new home: Rent-free space at Willamette University

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

The Jesus Seminar began making headlines in 1986 as more than 70 biblical scholars voted on which sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels probably derived from him and what words were more likely put in his mouth by Gospel writers or early church tradition.

The volunteer group, a part of the Westar Institute in Santa Rosa, California, drew upon years of mainstream scholarship to inform their views. But founder Robert Funk, a New Testament scholar, said that such critical findings rarely surfaced in churches, much less among the general public.

To counter televangelists in the 1980s and to gain news media attention, Funk asked seminar members to cast votes by dropping red, pink, gray or black balls into a box after hearing presentations and discussions. Eventually, less than a third of Jesus' sayings received red votes of authenticity. Many sayings were blackballed—an outrage not only to many believers but also to some academic colleagues who called the provocative method unscholarly.

The Jesus Seminar was ridiculed by detractors, but as its research lost its novelty it faded from the news. Funk died in September 2005, and because he took no salary as Westar executive director, it was not evident that the nonprofit group could carry on. “Many people predicted its demise,” said Andrew Scrimgeour, the dean of libraries at Drew University and new chair of the Westar board of directors.

However, the outgoing board chair, Lane C. McGaughy, this year engineered a major money-saving relocation to the private Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, across from the state capitol. A longtime professor there, McGaughy convinced university president Lee Pelton, already a supporter of the Jesus Seminar, that the academic group and its Polebridge Press would fill the university's desire for an

additional research center and an expandable university press.

“Westar was never on the verge of closing shop,” McGaughy said. A core of Jesus Seminar fellows and lay associates “decided that Westar is an important voice for disseminating the results of serious scholarship on the Bible to the literate public.” Its leaders had the respect of many biblical scholars not associated with theologically conservative schools.

Most people who looked into what the Jesus Seminar was saying “realized that our work was more mainstream (and boring) than they had thought,” said one participant. “The shock value was lost.”

Indeed, for years best-selling authors John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg were prominent in both the Jesus Seminar and the Society of Biblical Literature. Popular author-scholars such as Karen Armstrong, Elaine Pagels and Phyllis Tickle are Westar backers. The board was chaired for a while by John Dillenberger, who was instrumental in the founding of the multiple-seminary Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

The Jesus Seminar still fills requests from two dozen congregations yearly to lead one-day conferences at their churches. A \$3.5 million funding campaign, chiefly to endow a chair for Funk’s successor, already has met 44 percent of its goal, Scrimgeour said in an interview. Finally, the gift of a rent-free building from Willamette and the academic ties to the university are proving “a boon to our budget,” he said.

In a related development, New Testament scholar Stephen Patterson, who has taught for two decades at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, will join the Willamette faculty in the fall of 2010, taking the endowed chair once held by emeritus professor McGaughy.

Patterson heads a new Westar project, the Seminar on Christian Origins. “Re-describing Christian origins is as important as re-describing Jesus,” Patterson said via e-mail. “For more than half the world’s Christians, the church is the voice of divine authority on earth,” said Patterson, an expert on the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. “Before there was orthodoxy, there was variety. We want to explore that.”

Participants in an earlier seminar on the Acts of the Apostles have concluded that that New Testament narrative was written in the second century, rather than in the

80s or the 90s of the first century. The seminars on Acts and Christian origins “are dethroning the popular perception of the Book of Acts as reliable history,” contended Scrimgeour.

Theology professor Arthur J. Dewey of Xavier University in Cincinnati, who writes editorials for Westar’s bimonthly magazine, *The Fourth R*, said the two seminars “may well change the image of Christian history even more radically than . . . the Jesus Seminar.”