

Virtual seminary: Experiments in video learning

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

For people unable to attend seminary, seminary can come to them, thanks to a new project from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. The Wesley Ministry Network (WMN) enables people to sit in on the seminary lecture hall (via DVD), chat with other students and even the professor (over the Internet), and read the books their ministers had to go to seminary to learn about (see www.WesleyMinistryNetwork.com).

Many professors at Wesley and other seminaries speak in local churches regularly, but cannot fill the demand for solid teaching that comes just from the churches within driving distance. WMN uses Web and video technology to allow some of Wesley's teachers to be in multiple places.

WMN follows on the heels of Disciple Bible Study, an extraordinarily successful effort at bringing top-quality biblical study to congregations. Begun by United Methodists some 15 years ago, the Disciple series has reached thousands of people in all denominations with presentations largely by seminary professors and preachers. Local instructors (even if they are already ministers) must be trained specifically to lead Disciple. Students agree to attend weekly for a year, during which they study either the entire Bible (Disciple I), Genesis, Exodus, Luke and Acts (II), the prophets and Paul (III), or the wisdom and historical books of the Old Testament and the Johannine literature (IV). Disciple also features a course in doctrine called "Christian Believer" and a new one titled "Jesus in the Gospels."

WMN differs from Disciple in its cost (less), its time and reading requirements (also less), its training requirements for leaders (much, much less) and most important, in offering the sort of sustained teaching from a single professor that normally only courses in seminaries provide. In this way, it is more like the Web-based courses available from schools like Asbury Theological Seminary or fundamentalist Dallas Theological than it is like Disciple.

Yet unlike Web-based teaching programs (but like Disciple), WMN seeks not to educate individuals in front of computer screens, but to gather small groups to hear lectures, pray, and then discuss the material. In this way it is a fitting follow-up to Disciple or an alternative to it for those unable to commit to that course's demands on participants' time.

Three courses are available from WMN, including one by its director, New Testament professor Craig Hill, based on his book *In God's Time*. It's a critical discussion of popular dispensationalism, and aims to provide a genuinely biblical view of prophecy and eschatology. A course by Amy Oden, "Women Speak of God," features a series of readings from important women in church history. Old Testament scholar Denise Dombkowski Hopkins discusses the prayer book of Israel in "Journey Through the Psalms." Video courses in Christian ethics and Old Testament and New Testament theology are being planned.

The courses include eight to ten lectures of some 20 minutes each, followed with questions supplied in a participant's manual that begin by summarizing the material and end with seeking applications to people's lives.

For example, in Hill's course, the first session focuses on describing eschatology and why it matters. Participants are later asked, "What in your experience might make it difficult for you to believe the Bible's message of hope?"

Amy Oden's lecture on Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz of 17th-century Mexico details her struggle against church leaders who were unhappy with a woman teaching and publishing theology. She replied that she was also unhappy with those who purport to teach without the necessary theological gifts from God. She patently had those gifts, and didn't know what to do with them other than to put them to faithful use. Mainline church members are here shown the wrestling their pastors undergo in seminary with both the tradition of the church and those key voices of dissent within the tradition.

The Wesley Ministry Network, together with Disciple, indicates a return to catechetical basics in mainline churches. It's about time. Fundamentalist churches tend to work hard at the teaching task, but are not likely to engage members with historical critical scholarship of the Bible or with questions from the margins of the tradition.

The ancient church required a multiyear catechesis before one could be baptized. In those days, laypeople were already so well educated they could be ordained within days. In our age, the process has been reversed: one can become a Christian in days, but needs years to be ordained.

It is hard work to embrace the fullness of Christian faith while also responding to the challenges of modern critical inquiry. WMN offers further resources to do just that. Hill calls it “our way of doing church renewal.”

Says Hill: “Our goal is to equip believers to think ‘Christianly’ at a higher level. I believe much of what ails mainline Protestantism is a lack of critical thinking.” That is supplied here, along with the sort of small-group experience of prayer and mutual concern needed to nourish heart and mind.