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## Special Forum: Distance Learning

# Life Together at Wartburg Theological Seminary in a Digital Age

by Craig L. Nesson

Wartburg Theological Seminary (WTS), founded in 1854, was for most of its history a highly residential seminary with a strong focus on life together in community. About 15 years ago, however, we began a process of developing distance education in both our master's degree and certificate programs that are preparing candidates to become church leaders as pastors and deacons. This shift has made theological education accessible to many more students. We now have students in 36 states, including Alaska, and are equipped also to work with international partners.

The WTS faculty employed findings from the "Learning Pastoral Imagination" project of Auburn Seminary in the design of new curriculum. Christian A. B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed (2016) write: "We find through listening to ministry leaders across the country that ministry today is less about exercising the authority of an office or role and more about embodying an authentic contextual wisdom only gained by daily practice of leadership on the long arc of learning ministry."

We value the six key findings of the Learning Pastoral Imagination study: (1) learning pastoral imagination happens best in formation for ministry that is integrative, embodied, and relational; (2) learning pastoral imagination centers on integrated teaching that understands and articulates the challenges of the practice of ministry today; (3) learning pastoral imagination requires both the daily practice of ministry over time and critical moments that may arise from crisis or clarity; (4) learning pastoral imagination requires both apprenticeship to a situation and mentors who offer relational wisdom through shared reflection and making sense of a situation; (5) learning pastoral imagination is complicated by the intersection of social and personal forces of injustice; (6) learning pastoral imagination is needed for inhabiting ministry as a spiritual practice, opening up the self and community to the presence and power of God (Scharen and Campbell-Reid 2016, 14).

A deep commitment to learning in context, specifically congregational contexts, informs the WTS curriculum design. Four years ago, we implemented an innovative new curriculum with three models—residential, collaborative, and distance—and two tracks—synchronous and asynchronous (Stache and Nesson 2018). Residential students (RL) attend class on our campus in classrooms equipped with interactive video technology. Collaborative students (CL) are doing ministry in congregations while they are attending classes synchronously in real time using Zoom. Distance students (DL) participate in the very same classes but can do so either synchronously or asynchronously, using materials prepared by instructors just for them. We approach each population of students as adding value to the whole: residential students bringing their experiences in robust on-campus activities, collaborative students bringing learnings from their contextual sites, and distance students reflecting on their daily work and local congregations.

The changing role of partners is significant for this paradigm shift. Historically, a limited number of congregations served as internship sites for students in the third year of their four-year degree program. A new category of "collaborative congregations" has been developed. These unique congregations, supervisors, and mentors work with students in their congregational placements during their entire four years of seminary—teaching, learning, and accompanying the student on

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the journey. The vital role and responsibility that partnerships have in all three models, particularly for the CL students, becomes even more indispensable for the ongoing formation of students. Moreover, it is incumbent on the seminary to be in a state of readiness to learn from these partners, including especially from the congregations, supervisors, and mentors who are working with our students daily.

The addition of new models and tracks in theological education demands new ways to accumulate and assess data. WTS has built on previous methods of data collection for assessment by adding real-time listening posts to gather student feedback. Regular formal and informal faculty conversations take place about what we are learning through formal and informal assessment in and out of the classroom, in order to constantly improve the educational experience. Gathering information is only the first step, however. We need to employ feedback mechanisms to make midcourse corrections as needed. Becoming nimble as an organization has been crucial for our ability to learn and respond, envision, and execute.

As one example of our efforts at ongoing assessment, distributed and collaborative students had been asking about new modes for WTS to embody what it means for us to be a worship-centered community. A Vital Worship Grant from the Calvin Institute had begun to facilitate a study process on digital worship with consultants in Fall 2019. A series of podcasts ([www.buzzsprout.com/949903](http://www.buzzsprout.com/949903)) were one fruit from grant activities to inform our practices in digital worship. The consultation was occasion to generate creative reflection on the possibilities and limits of livestreaming chapel services, something that we then were able to implement for the participation of all students and members of the WTS community at a distance in March 2020 with the onset of the pandemic.

The new WTS curriculum gives attention not only to education but to the formation of students. This accords with significant research on reimagining theological education as “practical wisdom” (Bass, Cahalan, Miller-McLemore, Scharen, and Nieman 2016). The origins of this undertaking are ancient, rooted in the classical notion of *phronesis*. How does theology become incarnate in bodies, in praying, in everyday life, in congregations, and in popular culture? Formation focuses on how theology becomes embedded in every fiber of life—personally, communally, and ecologically.

Our distance education program has been enhanced by membership in the Digital Theological Library (DTL), which provides more than half a million resources to our students in a digital format. As its website states, “The Digital Theological Library is a co-owned, born-digital library of religious and theological studies. The mission of the DTL is to provide its co-owning institutions with the highest quality digital resources in religious and theological studies at the lowest possible costs. Use of the DTL’s leased and purchased information resources is restricted to the DTL’s co-owning institutions.” The DTL became an even more indispensable resource for study and scholarship now under the conditions of social distancing during the pandemic.

We are involved in a brave new experiment in becoming one seminary and one community with one curriculum in a digital world. This effort has been led by a creative faculty working together to deliver theological education that is accessible to students, who have many different life circumstances. Now with the COVID-19 pandemic, WTS has been able to transition to a totally online delivery of courses to our students, including those who have needed the flexibility of accessing their education either synchronously by Zoom or asynchronously through our course management system. While this has been a profoundly stressful time for all of us, we have been able to provide a new structure to our seminary life, including daily chapel for all our students at a distance.

**WORKS CITED**

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