
The CONnECTS Program at Western Seminary: A New Vision for Continuing Education

Laurie Baron

Through a regular pattern of special lectures and workshops designed primarily for area clergy, continuing education has been a feature of Western Seminary for a long time. These lectures typically were given by a member of Western's faculty or a guest theologian or preacher, and they tended to be regarded as individual, one-time enrichment events.

Over the years, these lectures not only periodically opened the seminary's best resource—its faculty—to a wider audience, but also brought to campus some of the finest contemporary preachers and theologians: Fred Craddock, Maria Harris, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Lesslie Newbigin, Barbara Brown Taylor, David Bosch, William Willimon, L.V. Azariah, Justo González, Heiko Oberman, Jane Dempsey Douglass, and Donald McKim.

This occasion-based approach to continuing education, while certainly offering valuable and memorable events, reflected the widespread cultural assumption that one's formal education was sufficient preparation for a life spent working in any particular field. So doctors went to medical school, lawyers went to law school, preachers went to seminary and, by and large, they came out equipped to be doctors, lawyers, and pastors for the rest of their lives. Any further learning was gravy.

An assumption more specific to church life lay under the old pattern of continuing education. That assumption held that only "professional" Christians, that is, clergy, were interested in serious reflection on topics of Christian theology or practice. At Western, for example, the public has always been invited but seldom expected, and events have been scheduled for daytime hours, when those employed outside of the church were unavailable.

Both of these assumptions are crumbling under the realities of contemporary life. Specialized training for all fields has lengthened, broadened, added experiential requirements such as internships, and finally admitted its inadequacy in the near universal enthusiasm for "lifelong learning." No one expects to learn everything one needs to know for a lifetime of work in two, three, four, even six or eight years. The amount of available information is so vast and changes so frequently, the complexity of even one discipline in the contemporary context

so daunting, that obtaining a degree is increasingly viewed as only a first step in a lifetime of periodic, sometimes continuous, education.

Fading too, although more slowly, is the assumption that only clergy are interested in or in need of theological education, as well as the corollary belief that typical church programming is adequate to educate the laity. As cultural changes call Christians' beliefs and practices into question, it becomes imperative that more members of Christian congregations be deeply educated in their faith and trained to minister effectively in their settings.

Responding to these new realities, President Dennis Voskuil, in his inaugural address, October 27, 1994, painted a picture of the seminary in an expanded new role for the next century with these words:

It will be the mission of Western Seminary in the coming decades to serve as a center for renewal for the Reformed Church in America. It will be a theological academy, a meeting place, a spiritual retreat, a continuing education center, for the leaders of the missionary church in the future.

In those words lay a vision that is still struggling for a form.

Robert A. Coughenour, professor of Old Testament emeritus, began immediately to revitalize continuing education in the light of the new vision. He brought together an advisory committee of seminary faculty and staff, clergy, denominational representatives, and lay leaders to articulate an overarching purpose and to develop an expanded program for the seminary's efforts in continuing education.

The committee took as its immediate task to bring together the disparate events already being offered (not only lectures and workshops, but special training events sponsored by various seminary offices) to form the core of a new umbrella program, which it called CONnECTS (Continuing Education for Christian Training and Service). The committee also developed the following mission statement:

CONnECTS is an outreach program of Western Theological Seminary that seeks to serve the church through:

- continuing education opportunities for pastors and other religious professionals;
 - leadership development for both ordained and nonordained church leaders; and
 - personal spiritual enrichment for Christian men and women seeking deeper theological understanding.
1. Among Christian women and men there is a hunger for "something more" today. This yearning for a closer walk with God, a deeper understanding of Christian faith, and

sharper skills for Christian witness and service often stretches the resources of congregations. Western sees itself in the varied programs of CONnECTS as a partner with denominations and congregations in meeting the educational needs of Christians in today's challenging social climate of self-centeredness, moral confusion, and disbelief.

2. Western Seminary recognizes that theological education for ordination and training for specialized ministries goes beyond a two- or three-year degree program, requiring pastors and religious professionals to develop an orientation toward lifelong learning. The lectures, workshops, and other educational programs offered through CONnECTS reflect this understanding of the lifelong nature of learning.
3. Today's church faces a critical need for trusted and competent ordained and nonordained leaders. Thus, leadership development for church institutions, agencies, and congregations is essential. With a long history of preparing leaders for Christian witness and service, Western continues the tradition of leadership development through the training events and workshops of CONnECTS.

Under Coughenour's energetic leadership, an ambitious, two-pronged series of classis seminars and off-campus courses was added to the roster for the 1995-96 academic year. Classis seminars were to be one-day events, organized by classes in different regions around topics of interest to their members and led by seminary faculty. Off-campus classes were offered in four cities in western Michigan and the Chicago area. These were designed to be taught one night a week for about five weeks by faculty members on subjects within their expertise. The courses would be tailored specifically to the interests of church members rather than clergy.

Together, these regional educational opportunities were to "put the seminary on wheels," bringing its resources to a much wider portion of the church than can typically reach them. There is also, in the early minutes of the advisory committee, an echo of the vision of a "theological academy" in its exploration of the idea of developing a certification program for lay leaders. The program would include biblical, theological, historical, and ministry studies and would be recognized with an associate in Christian ministry certificate. In this planning, the focus clearly had widened to put Western in more direct service to the whole church.

Two years ago, the new CONnECTS program, complete with a full off-campus schedule, was launched. In the fall and spring of 1995-96, seven classis

seminars and ten five-week courses were offered. The classis seminars met with varied results, and only three of the five-week classes were actually held, due to low enrollment. Those three were, however, enthusiastically received.

The 1996-97 academic year brought changes to CONnects. Most significantly, Coughenour turned over leadership to Professor George Brown, Western's associate dean. As the year also brought a sabbatical leave for Brown, Evelyn Diephouse, a 1996 Master of Divinity graduate with a background in higher education, has held administrative responsibility for the year's programming.

Brown suspended off-campus offerings for the year, in light of their very limited success (as well as the fact that the seminary is currently understaffed and, therefore, the faculty is less able to take on additional teaching, especially coupled with travel). He now anticipates taking a more gradual approach, incorporating important lessons from the three courses that were taught.

Brown still hopes to develop a certification program in conjunction with these courses. In such a program, he said, "Lay people who serve as Sunday school teachers or Stephen Ministries volunteers would be able to take a program of study leading to a certificate in Christian education or congregational care. Others want more of a theological education but are not interested in completing a degree program or becoming ordained. They simply want to be better equipped for their particular ministry in the local congregation."

While meeting the educational needs of congregational leaders and pastors in their home classes requires building new networks of communication and the invention of whole new models for proceeding, continuing education on campus has the luxury of an established history on which to build. The series of guest lectures and workshops continues at the CONnects program's core, not serving clergy exclusively but focusing on issues in theology and contemporary life and aspects of the practice of ministry.

In 1996-97 the art of preaching was in high relief, as Western sponsored its biennial Henry Bast Preaching Festival and two seasonal workshops for preachers: preaching in Advent and seeker-sensitive preaching before Easter. The other lectures and workshops contained a rich variety of topics ranging from spirituality—Reformed, in medicine, and on consistories—to pastoral care—for the sick and dying and in the sticky wickets of congregations—to a look at the place of the seeker-friendly movement in America's religious history and a new look at the Holy Spirit on the part of contemporary theologians.

"Pastoral refreshment" conferences were held two consecutive summers (1995 and 1996) at the Geneva Camp and Retreat Center. These were week-long conferences specifically for pastors and spouses who wished to relax with colleagues, to play on the beach or golf course, and to reflect on two key aspects of pastoral life: leadership and preaching. Such events are expected to be a continuing component of CONnects.

Not everyone's educational needs will be served by CONnECTS. Some ministers will look to the Doctor of Ministry or the Master of Theology programs to meet their educational goals. Others may choose self-directed study in Western's library or with a faculty member on a particular subject. The CONnECTS director is available to arrange such individual learning projects, which eventually may include using computer technologies to facilitate significant long-distance study.

As CONnECTS finishes its second program year and looks to the future, it faces the continuing challenge of putting strong and sturdy flesh on an ambitious vision. It began with a great surge that has had to slow to a more deliberate pace, to give people and programs time and opportunities to find each other. But the vision expressed in the name remains. CONnECTS aspires to open more and more the full resources of Western Seminary to all who need them, truly to become a "theological academy, a meeting place, a spiritual retreat, a continuing education center, for the leaders of the missionary church in the future."