

A Journey of Continuing Education At Western Theological Seminary

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Continuing education at Western Theological Seminary (WTS) is located in a particular place, developed by particular people at different times, and accomplished because of shared visions, common values, and a passion for learning. Continual learning at WTS lives and is vibrant today because of a place called Journey. Journey has provided its space, a forum for significant voices that continue to value life-long learning, as well as a broader context to include all who share a passion for continual theological learning.

This paper explores the history of Journey, a center for the Church's learning at WTS in Holland, Michigan. Focus will be given first to the present dimensions of Journey's life – its current space at the seminary, the staff, the operating values and vision of Journey, specific programs for learning, and even the reason for Journey's name. Since Journey exists because of voices that have spoken "along the way," the paper will also provide a brief chronology of continuing education at the seminary. In addition, space will be given to a few of these voices so that readers may hear for themselves. Finally, an invitation will go out to all, not only to value the shared journey of life-long Christian learning, but also to live out three of Journey's expressed values: we learn the way of Jesus Christ; we learn together; we are made new by God's Spirit along the way.

Current Journey Voices: Name, Place, and Program

What's In a Name? Google the word "journey" today on your computer and you get 15,300,000 results in .06 seconds! What is amazing is not only the magnitude of listings, nor the speed at which the information is gathered, but the variety of descriptions, meanings, and uses of the word. "Journey" can be a musical group (from the late 70s), a new line of shoes, an emergent church, a travel magazine, a TV show, an adventure, and on and on.

Three specific definitions of the word "journey" from the dictionary are: (1) an act of travel from one place to another; (2) a day's travel; and (3) something suggesting travel or passage from one place to another.¹ This third definition is the image which Journey at WTS is trying to create. We are a people learning together on the way. Here is more of the story.

In 2000–2001, WTS began a strategic planning process with a subcommittee to flesh out an emerging priority "to develop a center for the continuing education

of the church.” Present in those conversations were George R. Hunsberger, professor of congregational mission; Sonja Stewart, professor of Christian education; George Brown, professor of Christian education and dean of faculty; and Tom Boogaart, professor of Old Testament (all faculty members of WTS). Their vision was to expand the seminary’s commitment to continuing education to include not just degree-seeking students but the whole people of God. They envisioned new ways of developing continual learning in and for the church. Among these were faculty mentored learning groups; partnerships for collaborative learning in the areas of discipleship, mission, leadership; lectureships, conferences, and workshops for the church. All were activities that the seminary had already been doing well. They also expressed a growing desire to expand the understanding of the role of seminary faculty to include serving as theological mentor for the church. In other words, they desired the faculty to be seen by the whole church as a theological servant of the church.

When Journey started formally in July of 2002 with the appointment of Hunsberger to be dean and developer of the center, a proposal was approved by the Lilly Foundation to initiate Journey Groups. Not only did it turn out to be the flagship program of the first five years of the center, embodying its vision of learning, but it also lent its name “Journey” to the center as a whole. “Journey” became the descriptive word and metaphor for Western’s commitment to continual theological learning. A quote from Journey’s current web site says it well:

Whether it is on the road from Ur that Abraham and Sarah traveled, or the road to Jerusalem that Jesus walked, or the road to Emmaus on which the risen Jesus joined a pair of discouraged disciples, the people of God have always recognized themselves to be journeying to the promises of God, growing in faith, love, and hope, knit together as a traveling community on the Way.²

What is in a name? For Journey at WTS, it is all about learning together on the Way; learning about being faithful disciples of Christ; learning in and with a company of other disciples; finding ourselves made ever new by the power and presence of God’s transforming Spirit.

What’s In a Place? Since 2003 Journey has enjoyed a home at WTS. In the Garden Level of the seminary’s DeWitt Theological Center (and recent building addition of 2003), one will find offices, work spaces, two meeting/conference rooms, one classroom, and several decorated spaces for conversation and hospitality. The current Journey staff include: George R. Hunsberger, dean of Journey and professor of congregational mission; Cynthia Holder Rich, associate professor of continuing theological education; Keith A. Derrick, coordinator of continual

theological learning; Pablo Canche, program associate for Latino theological education; and CarolAnn Bailey and Judy Bos, the two administrative associates. All these staff members work in this Journey space. Growing out of Journey, which is located in the Garden Level, (excuse the pun!) are continual learning opportunities, developing partnerships, ecumenical collaborations, new initiatives, and creative ways of learning to be God's people on the Way.

On a daily, weekly, and monthly basis, this staff interacts, debates, and makes decisions on the kinds of learning opportunities to offer the seminary community and the church. It is clearly evident in these rich conversations that the vision of being a "center for the continuing education of the church" is, on the one hand, accomplished with dedication and passion, but, on the other hand, will never be completely realized because none of us has arrived yet.

What's In a Program? Someone asked recently, "How does Journey decide the kinds of events to offer the church?" One approach to answering that question is by explaining the "value filters" working among our staff members. The following six get expressed on a regular basis in lively and engaging ways:

1. Events that promote theological learning from a Reformed perspective.
2. Opportunities that square with Journey's missional understanding of the church.
3. Learning that is ecumenical in spirit and diverse in perspective.
4. Programs that can reflect the "reign of God" in understanding and interpretation.
5. Learning events that engage people biblically and theologically.
6. Balancing both listening/responding to the church and leading the church.

These filters provide the criteria by which we determine the kinds of events to offer the church. When we have developed the learning themes for each event, we connect them to a specific event model that will best accomplish the learning goals. For example, some events are conferences, e.g., a one or two day event for presentation, dialogue, study, and interaction. Other learning occurs in a workshop format over one day. Journey offers learning experiences over a more extended time, with other learning partners, called Journey Groups. Travel study seminars are offered (thanks here to Donald Bruggink, who is the well-traveled director of the international travel seminars). Online courses and global forums connect people around the world on issues of global importance. The Children and Worship program is a specific training course. Seminars are created and offered because some learning opportunities require periodic meeting times in which to

learn around one theme. And there are lectures, which present a specific learning in a period of time lasting no more than an hour.

Over the years WTS and Journey have been the recipients of generous gifts, which have created sustained opportunities for learning in several important areas of church life. The Ridder Leadership Conference, the Osterhaven Lectures, and the Bast Preaching Program are all made possible by endowment funds. Other Journey programs, including the annual 1-3-5 Gathering (an event for recent graduates of Western's Master of Divinity program, at their first, third, and fifth year anniversaries), the Journey Groups, our annual Children and Worship Training Workshop, and the Smaller Membership Church Initiative (consisting of members from Episcopal, ELCA, PCUSA, and RCA regional churches) are grant-based ongoing programs. Finally, a variety of seasonal Journey events are created with a view to current issues important for the church's learning.

The point of listing the variety of these Journey programs is to give the reader an image of the "journey within Journey." There are many companions on this journey of continual learning – people valuing Christian education, creatively shaping events and learning opportunities, and forging partnerships that are developing and strengthening our way of learning to be disciples of Jesus Christ. The staff at Journey gives thanks to all of God's people who are learning on the Way. We give thanks to God for you.

During the most recent Fall 2007 "season of learning," Journey offered eleven learning events, consisting of two global forums, four conferences, three workshops, one lecture, and one online course. Six hundred-forty people attended these events. But for us at Journey, it is not about the numbers. Rather, our exclusive focus is to strive to create a context for learning to occur, regardless of the number participating. In addition to the Journey staff, scores of other people played a significant part in making these eleven events possible. Faculty members, planning teams, church leaders, and lay members of congregations throughout the church, even within and beyond the RCA, added another ninety-eight voices to the process of planning Journey events and of sustaining the learning after those events. The vision of being a "center for the church's learning" also includes being a place where the church participates in its own learning. What's in a program? People with vision for continual learning, people with passion for Christian education, people with commitments of time, money, and energy. Many companions on the way!

A Brief Chronology of Continuing Education at WTS

The staff at Journey also looks back in appreciation and sees how far this way extends back in time. In 1956, a WTS faculty committee consisting of three

professors (Mennenga, Kuyper, Mulder) was listed in the WTS catalog as a "Lecture Committee."³ Two lectures were offered that year to WTS faculty and students, one by Markus Barth and one by Hendrick Kraemer.

In 1963, the language in the WTS course catalog changed from "Lecture Committee" to "Lecture Series."⁴ This series was divided into "WTS Faculty Lectures" and "Guest Lectures."⁵ Eleven lectures were offered on the 1963-64 WTS calendar, consisting of three faculty lectures and eight guest lectures. By 1965, the series of guest lectures constituted an independent offering. The expressed goal of the Guest Lecture Program was to provide "a stimulating intellectual fellowship, enhancing the students' relation to a higher level of academic work and to a greater appreciation for the depths and scope of current theological inquiry."⁶

In 1969-70, special study opportunities were offered through WTS, including (1) Western Christendom Travel Seminars; (2) the Annual Management Seminar for seniors and (3) and a separate lecture program designed to enhance the regular student study program.⁷ Sonja Stewart joined WTS in 1970 as a part-time teacher in the Christian Education field. In 1980 she became an associate professor and full-time faculty member. Later in the mid-1980s Stewart became the Director of Continuing Education at WTS and fulfilled that role until 1988.

The 1983-84 WTS course catalog distinguished between the Lecture Series and Continuing Education, with ten lectures listed in the series and twelve workshops offered as independent educational events.⁸ The workshops brought to Western's campus such well-known names in the field of education as Sharon Parks, James Loder, and Jerome Berryman. Berryman was to play an instrumental role in Sonja Stewart's development of the Children and Worship program.

In 1987 the M.E. Osterhaven Lecture Series was inaugurated. This endowed program is designed to bring attention to the particular contributions of Reformed theology to the church. Such distinguished theologians of the church as James I. McCord, Martin E. Marty, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Lesslie Newbigin, and I. John Hesselink have lectured at WTS as part of this series.

In 1988 George Brown was appointed as new dean of faculty. As part of his responsibilities, Brown directed continuing education. The usual pattern of lectures and workshops continued, but with his appointment a change in focus occurred. Together with Stewart, Brown began to expand its focus to encompass not only WTS students but also audiences of the broader church.

The following year marked the beginning of the Henry Bast Memorial Preaching Program. Its aim is the support and renewal of preaching in the RCA and in the broader church through a focus on the spoken Word. The program consists of five

components: preaching fellowships, a resident preacher to supervise the program, the Bast Preaching Resource Center in the Cook Center for Theological Research, the Henry Bast Professor of Preaching chair, and the Bast Preaching Lecture Series. Notable Lecture Series participants have been Fred Craddock, Eugene L. Lowry, William H. Willimon, and Eugene Peterson.

In 1994, Dennis Voskuil, president of WTS, appointed Robert A. Coughenour as continuing education program director with the express intent of expanding the program.

An advisory committee was formed at this time for the purpose. The name “CONnECTS” originated in order to give to the program identity and greater visibility. The new name of the developing program stood for “Continuing Education for Christian Training and Service. The desire of WTS to expand the program is reflected in the notes of an advisory committee meeting convened in May, 1997. The variety of ways in which the committee was envisioning how continuing education should take place include “workshops, lectures, conferences, classis seminars, travel-study seminars, intercultural immersions, evening courses, certificate programs for laity, educational consultations, faculty services, distance learning, and special status for non-degree seeking students.” By this time, Brown had been reassigned responsibilities for CONnECTS, and Evelyn Diephouse named as assistant director (1996-97). In 1996, CONnECTS co-sponsored the “Confident Witness-Changing World” Conference with the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) under the leadership of George R. Hunsberger.

The Herman J. and Lenora Ridder Leadership Initiative began in 1997. This endowed program focuses on issues of leadership in the church and originally envisioned a biennial conference. Recent speakers at these conferences were Lyle E. Schaller, Max DePree, Bill Hybels, Jim Herrington, and Trisha Taylor. In 1999, a search began for a full-time CONnECTS Director, but without success. Two years later, WTS gathered people together to speak to the issue of the future direction of CONnECTS. These voices are Sonja Stewart, George Brown, Tom Boogaart, and George Hunsberger. In the next section, the reader will have occasion to listen to those of Brown and Hunsberger, in addition to those of Vicky Menning and Cynthia Holder Rich.

Listening to Some Voices of the Past

The following consists of interviews that the author conducted with the four persons just mentioned. The first is with George Brown, current dean of faculty at WTS, who played a vital role in continuing education from 1988–2001.

What was your title and role in continuing education at WTS?

Dean of faculty, with one/fifth time responsibility for directing Western's continuing education program.

What developments in the program have you observed?

First of all, a change from continuing education to CONnECTS, which brought a clearer identity and a new label to what Western was trying to accomplish. CONnECTS was a short-hand way of saying Western wanted to expand continuing education into the broader church. Secondly, Sonja Stewart's genius was to articulate a vision of equipping people for ministry. "Equipping" was a big word in the '80s. That's why we brought to Western Seminary the big names in education at that time, including Jim Loder, Sharon Parks, Maria Harris, and Tom Groome.

What developments have been most significant for you?

The most rewarding, and at the same time the most disappointing, because it has not continued, was the effort in developing a publishing arm to our continuing education program. The dream was to stimulate theological discourse in the RCA through printed lectures, writings, and publications. *Occasional Papers* was launched in 1999 under the auspices of CONnECTS. The three published papers are: *Holiness and Hermeneutics* by James V. Brownson (no. 1); *Atonement in the Heidelberg Catechism: A Proposal for Variety* by Leanne VanDyk (no. 2); and *Taking Time To Be Holy: Christian Education in a Mach 3 Culture* by George Brown, Jr. (no. 3). There were also three published lectures: *Truth to Tell: The Gospel and Public Truth* by Lesslie Newbigin; *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* by Wolfhart Pannenberg; and *The Changing Shape of Church History* by Justo Gonzalez.

What do you value most about what is now called Journey and its role for the church?

I have to choose just one? Well, Journey provides affordable access for clergy and laity to quality theological learning. It also gives opportunities to laity who want more in-depth learning to grow in their faith journeys. And I believe, structurally within the seminary, the creation of specific Journey space, full-time staff, and a budget, are extremely important values of the seminary, which now benefit the church. Let me just say that in prior years, continuing education was sort of an ad hoc affair, added onto other responsibilities of so many people, including the advancement and development offices. Oh, and one more, the fixed and endowed events like the Bast Preaching Program, the Osterhaven Lectures, and the Ridder Leadership Conference were quality events that gave identity and credibility to Western's continuing education program.

Who has influenced your thinking most about how you fulfilled your role in leading continuing education at Western?

Dr. Joe Levine at Michigan State University. He was my mentor while I worked on my dissertation in adult education. Cyril O. Houle, who wrote *Patterns of Learning*. He challenged me to think and believe that education and learning take place in a variety of ways, patterns, and methods. Eduard Lindemann, author of *Adult Learning in America*.

The second interview is with interview with George R. Hunsberger, current Dean of Journey, who speaks about continuing education at WTS from 2001 to the present.

What was, and is, your role with continuing education at Western?

In July 2002, I was appointed to be dean of the center, for what was then being inaugurated as a new center for the continuing education of the church. One of the first major programs of the center, our Journey Groups, eventually lent some of its name to the center, which since late 2003 has been known as "Journey: a Center for the Church's Learning." Since that time I have been dean of Journey.

What developments in the Journey program have you observed?

In the seminary's strategic planning process in 2000-2001, a subcommittee was formed to sharpen a vision for the future of continuing education at Western. George Brown, Sonja Stewart, Tom Boogaart, and I looked not only at the design of events and programs, but at the role of theological faculty within the broader church. It was affirmed that within the continuing education program of WTS, the faculty would offer itself as theological mentors to the church. We discerned a wider vocation for the seminary in the church's learning, and knew this would require a greater investment of faculty resources to fulfill it. The strategic plan included another development, the creation of space for the center to have a home within the facilities of Western Seminary. The current space in the Garden Level of the DeWitt Theological Center gives Journey that home. It's a place for offices and work, but it's also a place for learning, for hospitality, for meetings, and for eating!

Another major development was the Lilly-funded Journey Groups program. This has shaped so many facets of our current program and staffing. These groups were founded on three convictions that continue to influence how we design learning opportunities: learning happens with peers; learning unfolds on a shared pathway; and congregations and pastors learn together. This grant allowed us to add staff earlier than might otherwise have been the case, including the call to Cynthia Holder Rich to join the center as a faculty member, and the hiring of our administrative assistant, CarolAnn Bailey. It has shaped how we think about how

learning happens in a variety of ways. It is really the flagship piece of our identity. Early on, the addition of part-time program staff, Rev. Vicky Menning, was significant. Vicky came in 2003 and brought an important collaborative piece to our perspective and working relationships with the RCA and other denominations. Likewise, Cynthia's voice, beginning in late 2003, brought a commitment to many multicultural and diversity initiatives, both here at Western and in the church.

We have seen a continual development over the last few years of a great variety in what we offer, both in terms of topics and the number of events and learning opportunities. We now provide on-line courses, forums for discussing global issues, and ongoing small learning groups.

What do you value most about Journey's role and purpose for the church?

I value Journey's capacity to be fluid. By that I mean the dynamic ability here in Journey to be able to respond to the needs of the church and the call of the Gospel. Journey continues to find ways to partner with staff of the RCA and other denominations. We continue to host and shepherd creative pathways for learning to take place, and we have become a place for the church to find companionship in theological learning.

Who has influenced your thinking most about how you fulfill your role?

My ministry style has been influenced deeply by my Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship staff days and by my Inter-Varsity mentor, Pete Hammond. Those early days of pastoral companions in Mississippi, while pastoring in Biloxi, and later teaching in Jackson, had a lot to do with shaping my temperament, my interests and instincts, and my model of ministry – small groups, leadership training, mentoring, and the love of being involved in people learning together. I learned so much from those early experiences.

I have a special conversational partnership with George Brown. Over the years, we have engaged in many great conversations about adult education and adult learning in the church. My involvement with the GOCN also continues to shape and influence much of what I do at Western, in my teaching, my role with the Journey Groups, and my one-on-one relationships.

The third person interviewed is Vicky Menning, who serves as coordinator of church health and coaching for the RCA. She speaks about the years 2003–2006.

What was your title and role while you were at Journey?

The official title was something like Partner for Church Revitalization, but it was the role that was significant. I was brought on the Journey staff as a program person to help coordinate partnerships between WTS, The General Synod Council (RCA) and the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes. Early in 2003, as the Regional Synod was initiating its Refocus and Natural Church Development work, there were conversations about coordinating the efforts of the RCA, Journey, and the Synod. A vision of partnership developed from these meetings.

What developments in the Journey program have you observed?

I guess partnerships come to my mind first. Journey and the RCA have partnered in so many ways recently, like leadership issues, discipleship areas, the Cooper Missional Leadership Team, and even the areas of mission services. Also, the partner events between the ELCA, the RCA, the PCUSA, and our Episcopalian friends in West Michigan have been significant and rewarding for me personally. We initiated learning events for the smaller membership churches. We helped so many of these congregations in meaningful ways.

Is that what you value most about Journey's role for the church?

Well, we do need each other and we must work together, both Journey and the church. Partnerships are important. Also, the physical space in the Garden Level is a relational space for the church. It's a place for peer groups, pastor networks, meetings, and learning. It's a real gift to the church to be able to come to the seminary and have a place for learning and conversation. We can't do the work of ministry alone. Journey is a place that brings people together for creative thinking and formation. It's a great gathering space.

Who has influenced your thinking most about how you fulfilled your role while you were here at Journey?

The teams I worked with over the years. This includes the Cooper Leadership Team, the Small Membership Churches planning teams, the Ridder Leadership Team, and the 1-3-5 Gathering planning teams. For me it's all about the relationships and conversations, and colleagues in ministry, that influence my thinking.

The fourth and final interview is with Cynthia Holder Rich, who is associate professor of theological education at WTS and Journey staff member.

What is your title and role at Journey?

My title is Associate Professor of Theological Education, which is a faculty position, located in Journey. After the Lilly-funded Sustaining Pastoral Excellence grant for the Journey Groups was secured in 2003, I was hired as a faculty mentor for four of the six Journey Groups. This was a major role for me my first year at Journey. CarolAnn Bailey was also added as an administrative assistant in January of 2004. About 60% of my time was designated to Journey Groups, with the other 40% distributed among some of my areas of interest, which are advocating for racial and ethnic learning opportunities, global issues of peace and justice, and collaborative educational events, both within the RCA and ecumenically.

What developments in the Journey program have you observed?

WTS has specifically addressed the need to provide more learning opportunities for a diverse population, and it is making this a priority, which is very encouraging to me. My personal interest in this area, and my passion for seeing it happen, has been expressed through my other role here in Journey, which is the director of racial/ethnic initiatives. I am both a faculty member and a Journey staff person. These two roles work nicely together in being able to create and develop a Certificate Program in Urban Pastoral Ministries for pastors in urban settings in West Michigan, and being able to chair a diversity committee here at Western.

Rev. Pablo Canche has recently joined the Journey staff as a part-time Program Associate, working with me on some of the racial/ethnic initiatives, specifically for the Hispanic community. We just received a \$20,000 grant from the Wabash Center to promote diversity within the church.

I think some other developments have begun, that I am also pleased about. I'm hoping these can become trademarks of our Journey program. They are programs and learning events focused on peacemaking, women in ministry, justice educational issues, global forums, and racial learning.

Also, I believe the Journey space at Western Seminary has allowed more conversations to occur that will affect how we do theological education for the church in the future. It's a meeting place for organizations, groups, and various planning teams of the RCA.

What developments have been most significant for you?

The growth of the racial/ethnic diversity at Western and the learning opportunities that have occurred both at Journey and within Western.

What do you value most about Journey's role and purpose for the church?

Journey is a place where the academy and the local church can come together for learning and dialogue. Too often these two parts of the church are disconnected. I believe the local congregation is the sacred reality of the church; it's where the body of Christ lives very locally. One of our jobs is to bridge and merge these two realities.

Who has influenced your thinking most about how you fulfill your role here at Journey?

It's definitely not just one person. The other voices out there that have supported me are people like Tom Boogaart, George Brown, Leanne VanDyk, and Dennis Voskuil. Also, RCA folk from the Mission Team, like Bruce Menning, Roger DeYoung, and David Dethmers. And local pastors such as J. Lewis Felton, Jeffrey Hough, and Bobbett Hampton, pastors in local urban and diverse settings.

Conclusion: An observation from the perspective of my role

Since joining the Journey staff in April of this year (2007), one of my roles as coordinator of continuing education has been to observe and listen to the development of Journey. It certainly has grown into a multi-ethnic, diverse, collaborating, multi-dimensional program center for continual theological learning. The previous voices have shared their stories, values, visions, and experiences with Journey. Their voices continue to speak to the future of where Journey is going. There are many other voices that speak into the dialogues, conversations, and debates about what it means, not only to plan learning opportunities, but what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ "on the Way." This is the way it should be! This is one of the joys of this journey at Journey. We learn together on the Way.

The image and metaphor of a journey to which God calls us a disciples of Jesus Christ is an inviting image and a challenging call. We follow the way Jesus initiated. We are disciples of Jesus and disciples of that way of life. As we continually learn the way of Jesus, we walk with our feet literally stepping into and engaging the world; we move with our eyes looking at Jesus, but watching for ways to be disciples in our contexts; we act with hands that are reaching out in ways that speak of servanthood; we think with minds that are open to ever changing ways of being faithful followers of Jesus Christ. We also learn together as the body of Christ, in a variety of communities, in a variety of ways as children, youth, and adults over a lifetime. And we are made new by the presence and activity of God's Spirit.

This promise gives us hope as disciples on the journey. We, as disciples of Jesus, living under the reign of God, are the sign, instrument, and foretaste of this reign.

We are reformed and reforming according to the Word and the Spirit. May the ways we learn to be disciples “together on the Way” always be to the glory of God.

¹ *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “journey.”

² <http://journey.westernsem.edu/about/founding>, accessed 07 February, 2008.

³ *1956/57 Western Seminary Catalog*, 8.

⁴ *1963/64 Western Seminary Catalog*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *1964/65 Western Seminary Catalog*, 15, 31.

⁷ *1969/70 Western Seminary Catalog*, 17.

⁸ *1983/84 Western Seminary Catalog*, 28-9.